

The Safetthouse

ANTHOLOGY
OF
TELONIAN LORE





THE SAFEHOUSE ANTHOLOGY OF TELONIAN LORE

REVISION: 06•06•02



THE SAFEHOUSE NETWORK, LLC

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PREFACE

THE LORE OF VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES™ WAS INITIALLY UNVEILED ONLINE AS A TEASER FOR LONG TIME FANS OF THE VETERAN GAME DEVELOPMENT CREW AT SIGIL GAMES ONLINE. RELEASED AT THE EARLIEST STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT, WE OFTEN FELT WE KNEW MORE ABOUT TELON THAN THE GAME ITSELF

OVER TIME, HIS HIGHLY AESTHETIC CONTENT GREW. TELON SLOWLY MATERIALIZED AS A LIVING BREATHING WORLD WITH RECOGNIZABLE CHARACTERS AND RACES—ALL DEEPLY ENTRENCHED WITH SAGAS OF THEIR OWN. EACH TALE AND HISTORY ALL GAVE HINTS OF WHAT WAS TO COME. TRUE TO THE GAME'S DESIGN, THE LORE OF VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES™ HAS SET THE STAGE—A WORLD AWAITS NEW HEROES TO PLANT THEIR FEET AND BECOME PART OF TELON HISTORY.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES™, VISIT THE OFFICIAL WEBSITE AT WWW.VANGUARDSOH.COM. THE SIGIL GAMES ONLINE COMPANY SITE MAY BE FOUND AT WWW.SIGILGAMES.COM.

THE SAFEHOUSE

Who are we, you ask? *The Safehouse* is the quintessential online community dedicated to all things “rogue” since its inception in 1999.

Although we were founded with *EverQuest*¹ as the focus of our bond, we have grown over the years to support and discuss other MMORPGs, books, movies, pen and paper role playing games, and the occasional discussion of real life topics.

Our love for the rogue class is what keeps us going. If you seek information regarding living in the shadows, picking your mark, how best to escape detection, and possess an affinity for gaming and geek culture, visit us at www.thesafehouse.org. Our steadfast community of miscreants is always looking for more like-minded scalawags in order to compare notes.

The Safehouse is especially privileged to represent *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*[™] as an official Vanguard Community Affiliate site.



THE SAFEHOUSE STAFF

- ☉ Aidden, Web Administrator & Staff Writer
- ☉ Fricka, Forums Administrator & Contributing Editor
- ☉ Shadowcross, Ring Administrator
- ☉ Llabak, Forum Moderator & Staff Writer
- ☉ Nocte, Forum Moderator & Staff Writer
- ☉ Ruccus, Forum Moderator & Staff Writer
- ☉ Nenjin, Staff Writer
- ☉ Ryana, Safehouse Developer & Staff Writer

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THE SAFEHOUSE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE...

The Safehouse has a long sordid history and innumerable people have helped build our rogue community. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our friends—past and present—for their dedication and laughter over the years.

REMMI, GRANDFATHER OF THE SAFEHOUSE: The founding dwarf, without whom we wouldn't exist. Nary would a flame tongued rogue wander by our hallowed halls without meeting the business end of his Idjit Thwapping Stick.TM Yet we rallied around him in our time of need and he ever remains a reminder of the RP in RPG.

GLIP THE GNOME, RETIRED FORUM ADMINISTRATOR: The even tempered pantless gnome, without whom half of our community would have been banned (current staff notwithstanding). As current community representative of Sigil Games Online, Glip remains close to the gaming community and a constant presence here at the Safehouse.

Y.O.L.G. RETIRED STAFF: The notorious rogues who have given countless hours in both technical support and community organization. While gone they are never forgotten, and most still drop in from time to time: Kezzek, Wraine, Zato, Tibis, and Gyorg.

THE RING: Our Secret Society of Rogues and Miscreants. 'nuff said.

12_YR_OLD: Where art thou?! You're at least 18 now.

And most importantly,

THE SAFEHOUSE COMMUNITY: At the present time, nearly 30,000 wayward rogues have registered in our forums over the years. Thanks for all the strats, general input, roguelly advice, and genuine camaraderie. You're the reason we do what we do.

THE ANTHOLOGY PROJECT

The Safehouse Anthology of Telonian Lore has been compiled for lore aficionados and fans of *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*™. Watching this slew of prose unfurl before the game was released, it became apparent that the backdrop for our new gaming world was just as important as game mechanics and technical innovations. Snippets of the culture, the people, the places, and our anticipated adversaries were given to us in a classic disjointed/unorganized teaser format. Seemingly “fun” stories when put in context with the textual quotes along the margins of the official website, quickly started to materialize into a larger story—Telon was being revealed to those of us who crave immersion in our MMORPGs.

It should be noted here that the developers at *Sigil Games Online* specifically state that:

“The intent of the lore for Vanguard: Saga of Heroes™ is to provide a glimpse into the world through the eyes of those who live within its lands and create a more immersive game play experience. While we will make an effort to describe a world that you the player will indeed encounter in many or most ways and to a significant degree, it is also not the intent of the lore to necessarily or explicitly introduce game play mechanics or features.”

Disclaimers aside, it is important to remember that one possessing a strong knowledge of a MMORPG world is typically more engrossed than those wandering around wide-eyed and uninformed. While the lore may not be 100% accurate to the way things are in Telon, we’re betting that reading up on it will give us insight to potential quests and/or the lay of the land.

Obviously, this information is readily available at the *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*™ website. So, why are we doing this? For a several reasons:

- ☉ We are attempting to organize the lore as accurately and efficiently as possible. This is to encourage the casual reading enjoyment of these writings for the Vanguard community—a one stop, hassle free access to the lore.
- ☉ The editor of this document prefers a tactile experience when reading. Not everyone enjoys reading volumes of information from a screen. Get yourself a ream of paper and a three ring binder and print away!
- ☉ The anthology is a reference tool. Rather than just relying on a simple search engine, we have indexed each tidbit of information in a more traditional reference format. See a somewhat familiar or completely new term in game? Flip to the back of this anthology and reference the index.

The Safehouse Anthology of Telonian Lore is also intended to grow beyond the web lore. We would like to incorporate the assumed expanse of lore as it is unearthed in game. This task will require the help of the Vanguard community. Submissions from the community will be catalogued appropriately and proper credit will be given to the submitter. We hope to receive a community-sized effort to keep this tome up to date and accurate.

A companion file will eventually be made available for those who prefer this information in a *.CHM format.

COMMUNITY SUBMITTED CONTENT

Community submitted content should be lore. We are not looking to compile spoiler information from non player characters (NPCs) or other game mechanics. We are attempting to record history and the “words” of Telon. The existing section of this anthology that includes quotes was incorporated because they were part of the core web based lore from the official *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes™* website. We are looking for text from books, scrolls, inscriptions, and other elements that gives us a better understanding of the world. Substantial lore elements contained in NPC dialogue may be considered under editorial review. The process should not (and will not) be all that grueling, but weeding out needless spoiler information from good lore keeps things tidy.

To submit content for the anthology please visit the *Vanguard Wing* of our forums at www.thesafehouse.org/forums. Alternatively, you may email your lore submissions to nocte@thesafehouse.org.

VANGUARD COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTORS

The following members of the *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes™* community have contributed content to this collection. Our online publication of the *Safehouse Anthology of Telonian Lore* (www.thesafehouse.org/vanguard/lore) specifically denotes credit to their contributions. We hope this list grows as the game is revealed.

Boogenhagen • Iadien • Fossa • Fozzik • Foxeye • Kalthanan • Lycrist • Tanai • Zenya

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EDITORIAL CONVENTIONS WITHIN THE ANTHOLOGY

The layout of this document, for the most part, is pretty self explanatory. Chapters have been divvied up into literary styles. Entries within these chapters are listed alphabetically by title. The entire document is referenced through a table of contents and a traditional index.

THE VISIONARIES BEHIND THE LORE

The Safehouse would like to specifically tip our hats to those who have created the art and volumes of literature within.

LORE

Michael Butler
John Capozzi
Justin Deeb
Brad McQuaid
Nick Parkinson
Andy Platter
Steve Williams

ART

Brom
Den Beauvais
Tom King
Keith Parkinson
Christian Piccolo
Andy Platter
Ben Thompson
Ivaylo Vaklinov

EDITOR'S NOTES

As mentioned above, this document was initiated during the early development stages of *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*™. Organization was based on what was available at the time so the chapter structure may evolve as more lore is released. As one can imagine, well over 400 pages *pre-release* is a considerable commitment from the Sigil creative staff. As more lore is revealed, I imagine the anthology will be split into volumes to accomodate easier document management and reproduction.

Another drawback to starting this so early is that some lore, particularly the lore “snippets” in the official website margins, are disconnected and stand out as unique. This is also true of characters and lineage. At times I took leaps of faith based on the information I had for organizational purposes and attributing chronology. In most cases I made notes to point this out. As these things begin to be more clear, any errors I have made will be corrected as well as other polishing and improvements.

I hope you enjoy this labor of love—both mine and that of the authors who’s passion is quite evident. The rogue’s salute you!

Kevin “Nocte” Dolley
Certified Lore Nut
Staff Writer/Moderator
The Safehouse

That said. Let’s jump in where it all began... adrift...

OUTRIDER INCARNATE

I drifted, neither awake, nor asleep... neither in body, nor in mind.

I couldn't see, but then worlds and stars took shape about me and I knew they were there. I could feel them... almost reach out, had I an arm and a hand, to touch them.

Where was I? And who was I? And, for that matter, what was I doing in this place?

I tried to speak, to cry out, but I had no voice; instead I was surrounded by an empty cold.

And so I drifted still, with no concept of time or duration. Suns and their worlds came and went, some nearer and some far. But, all the while, I felt myself drawn to something... or somewhere. Perhaps someone?

Then another world came nearer... closer, I think, than any had come before. It was as unfamiliar to me as all of the other worlds had been, yet I felt a kinship to it. Something was alive there, and then I too remembered a little of what it was like to be alive. I was no longer merely curious, and no longer was I unable, or even unwilling, to guide my journey.

It was glorious. To be alone, for so long, but then to feel others nearby. I could reach out, and I could perceive them. What a busy world it was, full of hustle and bustle, of small creatures and great beings. Some I knew to be mortals (though I could not remember why or how)... men, dwarves, and elves. And others were what mortals called gods... entities of greater power, some with a desire to interfere and to meddle, while others benevolent. And yet, still, more were indifferent - uncaring towards one another, and to those both above and below, yet still seeking something... something very important, something vital.

At that moment I began to drift again. "No!" I began to cry, but of course, there was still no sound, and no tongue to make a noise, nor even lips to pretend a whisper.

But did my panic and desperation slow me, or was it something else? Again, I reached out and I embraced this unfamiliar world, for even the unknown was preferable to the void I did know.

And so my body took form... my spirit faded, and the sense of floating left. I could feel the cold earth beneath me, and I was lying upon it, face down.

“Ho, what is this?” thundered an unfamiliar voice. “What have I caught as though a fish swimming in the ether?”

I gasped, taking my first breath... but was it my first breath?

I slowly rose, first to my knees, and then, just barely, to my feet. I found myself leaning against something smooth, but made of stone - a pillar perhaps. My eyes slowly opened, adjusting to the light. Rays from the sun illuminated a fog enshrouded temple, and though the ground under my feet was dry, the air was humid, almost alive.

“I know not from whence you've come, strange one, but I am in need. You shall be my emissary.”

I looked around, trying to find the source of the voice, but to no avail. I was alone. And I was very afraid, but not because of the voice, nor due to my unfamiliar surroundings.

I was afraid because I remembered then who I was: Aradune Mithara, the Ranger, the Outrider.

But that name, that answer to my question, only brought a flood of new questions—questions more unsettling and terrifying than anything my *fragmented memory could recall...*

HISTORIES, GEOGRAPHICA, & PEOPLES OF TELON

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS THE SCHOLARLY WRITTEN WORKS DETAILING TELON'S SOCIETY'S HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND CULTURE. THESE STUDIES ARE NOT MERE OBSERVATIONS, BUT PUBLISHED WORKS RECORDING THE LIFE AND ENVIRONS OF KNOWN CIVILIZATION. SNIPPETS OF THESE TOPICS MAY BE FOUND IN OTHER WRITINGS AND CHAPTERS, BUT FOR THE SAKE OF ORGANIZATION, THEY HAVE BEEN FILED ELSEWHERE.

MOST NOTABLE OF THESE INCLUDE:

- ☉☉ Pepran Baldarus' account of the fall of Targonor is found in parts fifteen through twenty (page 290 through page 324) in "Willem's Stand".
- ☉☉ Mazhar Mateen's oral histories of Ahgram and Qalia are found in "Mateen's Histories" on page 232.

THE BREAKING

A PAGE FROM A MORDEBI HISTORY OF THE BREAKING

The waves rose and Mordebi sank below the surface never to be seen again. The gleaming towers disappeared one by one beneath the turbulent sea. Those within the city had perhaps enough time to curse the gods for their actions, and wonder why divine wrath was turned upon fair Mordebi.



THE FALL OF SHIDRETH THE ENRICHER

The ambition of Khelium was so great that he betrayed both his ruler and his mentor. He gathered about him the sages and mystics who believed the crown and scepter belonged to the enlightened and was earned by deed and not by lineage. One betrayal eases the birth of another and Khelium turned on his jackal brother, the Vizier, and became the Traitor. At first, he was content to soar above the fray waiting to pick on the carcasses of the fallen. That soon would change. Many things would change.

Shidreth the Enricher awoke to his death as the long knives fell upon him. Even his concubine was not spared as she met her own grisly end. His body was thrown from the walls for the carrion dogs to eat. His sons, although furious for the transgression but fearing for their families, left the Jewel City the whims of the Vizier. Many of those who stayed in the city aligned themselves with the Sons of Shidreth and secretly worked for their return. The Thousand refused to work in stealth and gathered their numbers and marched about the city.

And the sons of Shidreth sought out the followers of Jathred. The struggle boiled over with the slaughter of the Thousand Martyrs. The sand shifted and changed but it could never remove the stain of blood spilt. The Traitor watched and gathered his own force, the vulture to the warring jackals. However, this vulture became an eagle and joined the fray.

The Thousand raised their voices for reason. The deed done by the Vizier should be punished but not paid for by more violence. Their pleas were welcomed upon the blade of the followers of Jathred. They were struck down without mercy and their blood became one with the sand, staining the grains red forever.

A GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF THESTRA

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

For as far back as anyone can remember, trolls have sprung forth from the swamps of Thestra. While it has proven impossible to eliminate the trolls altogether, great efforts have been made to contain them. Recently, however, these efforts have proven most dangerous and less than completely successful.

North of the river Beranid, at the base of the foothills, lies what remains of Targonor. The structures here have all been burned down or toppled. The stone and wood walls are all that remain standing since the invaders swept through decades ago. Only a handful of attempts have been made to liberate the fallen city. They have all failed dismally.

Battlebrine Lake lies between the Beranid Downs and the Elven Forest. The lake was named in memoriam of the great orc - goblin wars, as the land bordering it was an area of intense conflict. During these battles the Hammerhome River, which flows out of the forest and feeds the lake, was said to have turned a muddy red from the carnage.



HEROES OF THE BERANID: A STUDY OF THE FOLK CHAMPIONS

Barret Barleygrove, sat upon his pony and watched as the battle progressed. The combined forces of Loric Targonor made charge after charge towards the Orcish lines. Barret was desperate to join the fight but knew his orders well; to hold the right flank. Duty and honor were both traits instilled in him by his time and training under the tutelage of Loric Targonor.



A HISTORY OF THESTRA

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

As the orcs scoured the land in search of their next target, the human army raced off in three directions. One division rode high into the eastern mountains and beseeched the giants for their aid. A deal was brokered. One that would cost them greatly, but the humans had no choice. Reluctantly, they agreed.

Another division sped to the dwarven compound, where their king was made aware of the advancing horde. Without hesitation, every able-bodied dwarf prepared for war. Surplus weapons and armor were hurriedly refitted to accommodate the larger humans. Within days, the Dwarves began the march to the northern coast, where the armies would assemble.

The third division of humans rode west to instruct the citizens of Targonor in the defense of the city. After recruiting the Halflings, who sent many carts of excess food as well, they set off for the north coast.

As the battles ensued each of the races suffered almost unbearable losses. In the end, the orcs, and goblins were eradicated, as were the Vulmane who allied with them. Only the Vulmane that had not taken up arms in the war were spared, but were watched with great prejudice and suspicion. The victors returned home broken and weary of war, to once again rebuild their societies. The high elves went to work building a new city from the ashes of their ruins. Though the Humans, Dwarves, and Halflings had not suffered great damage to their cities, many lives were lost and they would not recover fully for several generations.

TARGONOR'S LEGACY

BY JEZPER CLAUDEN

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

The burden carried by Loric Targonor almost destroyed him. It was as if the weight of the entire world rested on his shoulders... Without Targonor, strife and anarchy would have won the day. In an unlikely turn of events, Targonor was able to unite the wandering families and shock-stricken inhabitants into a cohesive community which could not only defend itself, but strike back at all comers.

As long as my standard remains, I shall be with you; This oath, given by Loric Targonor at the Battle of Widow's Veil, prevented the rout and destruction of the emerging kingdom by inspiring a hard-fought victory, one which finally pushed the marauders back beyond the Territories. To this day, flying the Standard of Targonor pays homage to the greatest hero to rise out of this dark period in history.

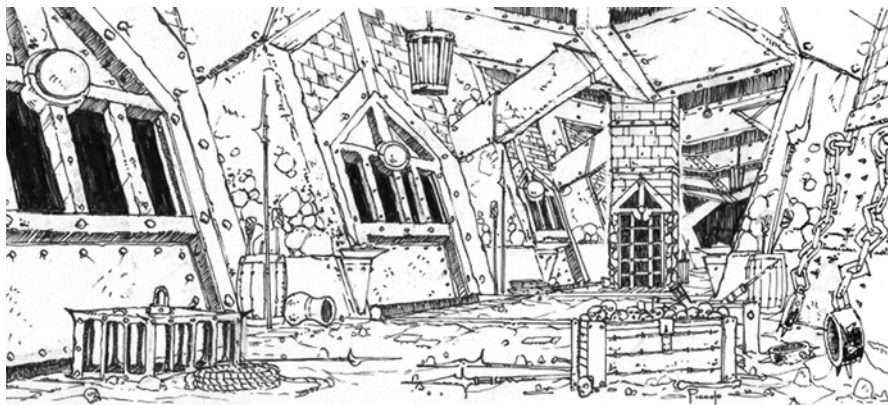
The lasting influence of Loric Targonor is felt in all aspects of Thestran society. Even now, the commitment to family and community, the devotion to service, both civic and military, and the adherence to a high moral code are demonstrated in the dealings in the marketplace and the negotiations within the Council Chambers. Each member of society recognizes their duty to carry on King Targonor's legacy in all they do.

TREATISE ON FALGARHOLM

BY OTTO HELGAR

Over time, Falgarholm has become home to several tribes of humans. Men and women alike, forsaking the trappings of “civilized” society for hardy lifestyle of the proud giant-kin, have relocated to the Highlands. These barbarians strictly adhere to ancient Giant law, deferring to Falgarholm's Half-giant leaders when issues and disputes arise.

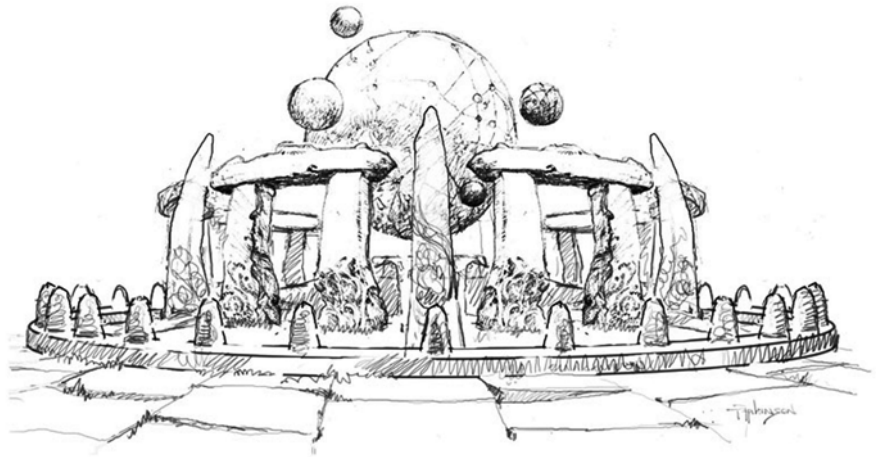
Some casual observers have labeled giant society uncivilized. Had they looked further, they may have realized their error. Falgarholm has an ancient heritage that has remained more intact than any of the Thestra's other races. Anyone spending a significant length of time in their ancient city cannot escape the ties these citizens have to this history and the great pride they take in their bloodlines.



TREATISE ON THE ELVES OF LETH NURAE

BY OTTO HELGAR

Shortly after Leth Nurae was originally settled and constructed, the orcish hordes, along with their goblin allies, invaded and sacked the city. During the course of the war, Leth Nurae was taken and lost several times by both sides. When the orcs were finally vanquished, the elves were able to complete their city and many of the buildings still stand to this day.



THE WIDOW'S VEIL PEAKS

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

Bordinar's Cleft, the rocky mountain home of the dwarves, is home to many of the most precious ores on Thestra. Mining teams of all races can always be found excavating the surrounding area, hoping to strike a vein.

The mining teams dig in the Widow's Veil at the good graces of the dwarves. They claim it to be a mutually beneficial relationship as they are able to sell supplies to the visiting workers. Many have found it peculiar though, how nobody but the dwarves seem to ever be able to find the large deposits.

The mines in the Widow's Veil, while having the potential to be very rewarding, are also wrought with danger. Many of the region's natural inhabitants do not take kindly to strangers tunneling into their homes. Some of the more intelligent have been known to launch pre-emptive ambushes on mining parties before they even begin work.

Few places in the known lands contain such a bountiful supply of ore and stone as do the Widow's Veil Peaks. Construction of Bordinar's Cleft, Rindol Field and even Tursh all relied at least in part, on stone quarried in the Widow's Veil.

When the Halflings called upon their dwarven neighbors to save their fields from flooding, the resulting construction project was a massive undertaking for which generations of Halflings would be indebted. The stone used in the dam was quarried almost entirely in the Widow's Veil.

GOVERNING, LITIGATING, AND REGULATING

RULES, RULES, RULES! YOU CAN'T ESCAPE THEM, THOUGH THE GOOD ROGUE MAY BE ABLE TO DUCK A FEW.

EVERY CORNER OF TELON HAS VARIOUS CODES OF GOVERNMENT, LAW, OR ORGANIZATION. THIS IS TRUE FROM THE MOST DEVELOPED CIVILIZATION TO THE TRIBAL VILLAGE. THIS CHAPTER IS A COLLECTION OF TEXTS, DOCUMENTS, AND OFFICIAL EDICTS OF OPERATION FROM VARIOUS PLACES AROUND THE WORLD.

SAGES ARCANE: REGULATIONS AND BYLAWS

Upon the death or abdication of the Master, a new Master shall be chosen from among the current members providing each nominee is in good standing and free from outside encumbrances. Outside encumbrances would include any advisor appointment to the Royal Court as well as actively mentoring an initiate to the Order. The nomination process commences on the announcement of the death of the Master and terminates on the occasion of burial of the Master.

SAGES ARCANE: LEXICON OF LEARNING

A fundamental skill of those who pursue the Arcane arts is the ability to be free from distraction. Most first year initiates spend their time learning how to cast a single cantrip in unsettling conditions. There have been many initiates who have injured themselves or others in these pursuits. Those unable to perfect this initial task find their stay in the Sages Arcane rather short.

TAXATION DECREE

ROYAL DECREE

From the August Court of Jodus Mercer Targonor III

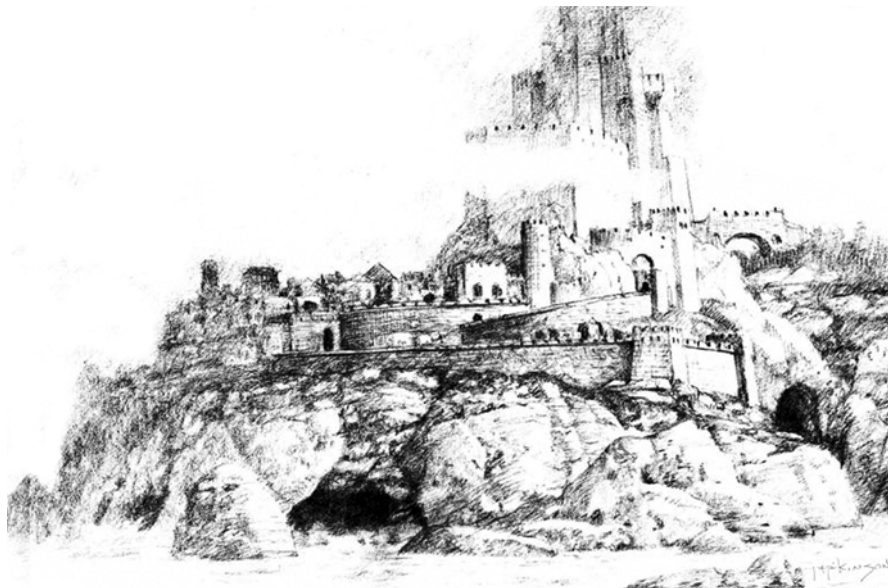
King of Thestra and Environs Therein

Taxation

Religion

The contributions of the Priesthoods toward the betterment of Targonor, and the Kingdom of Thestra in whole, have been recognized and acknowledged. By order of His Majesty, the August and Sagacious King Jodus Mercer Targonor III, the collection of monthly taxes from all religious institutions shall henceforth be eliminated. Until such time as His Majesty determines, those citizens in the employ of the Royal Treasury for the purpose of assessing, collecting, and maintaining taxation records shall strike all Accepted Religious Institutions from their rolls.

By Order of the Royal Treasury



TREATISE ON RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

BY HANRICK LANTIER

Not everyone is suited for our arcane studies. Therefore, our rigorous and comprehensive selection process must be followed in each case. The ability to cast a simple spell is certainly one criterion. Of more importance however, is the candidate's ability to read as well as scribe. As a whole, our fellowship would be better served by promoting these skills to prospects as early as possible to assure ourselves strong apprentices in the future.

The success of our efforts of seeking out and acquiring candidates within Tursh has allowed us to open a guildhall in the village. Several fellow members have volunteered to suspend their research to staff this satellite hall. Their secondary responsibility will be to instruct and test new candidates and apprentices from Tursh using the same methods and processes we employ here. However, their primary responsibility, and something that is not public knowledge, is to funnel the most promising and most talented apprentices to our Hall in New Targonor. Tursh is simply too provincial to be allowed to surpass the majesty and brightness of our city.

ANCESTRAL LORE AND CREEDS

ALL THINGS REGARDING THE ORIGINS OF THE RACES, THE DEALINGS OF THE GODS, AND SACRED TEXTS OF FAITH CAN BE FOUND IN THIS CHAPTER. MOST RACES AND/OR SOCIETIES HAVE THEIR OWN MYTHOS TO DEFINE THEIR PURPOSE IN LIFE AND THEY ARE ALL FASCINATING TALES THAT WEAVE THEIR WAY INTO THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE DEVOUT. OF COURSE MANY HOLD LESSER CONVICTIONS, IF ANY AT ALL.

NONETHELESS, THE LORE IS THERE—GIVING HINTS AT THE CUSTOMS AND DISPOSITIONS OF THE PEOPLE.

THE CHILDREN OF STIIRHAD

And Great Stiirhad awoke¹. He raised his club of fire and smote the land surrounding him. The land bowed to his will and called him Lord. The Great Stiirhad accepted their fealty and slept. His sleeping form provided shade to his new children and the rain ran down him and nourished the fields. At times, one of his children would awaken him from his long slumber and he would lash out with his fiery club again.

From the bowels of Great Stiirhad arose the under-dwellers. The black lands about the slumbering giant became hosts to towering fortresses that housed the tainted fey. A new kingdom arose, vile in its existence and a threat to the mighty Ahgramun and Mordebi.

And Ahgramun sent its mighty chariots and lancers. The swords of Mordebi joined in the march. The voices of their legion sang of impending victories as they journeyed south. A common cause united them where their common ancestry had failed.

Death waited for Ahgramun and Mordebi at Stiirhad. Wave after wave assailed the fortresses for naught. Ahgramun and Mordebi bloodlines joined as one as they stained the black rocks. The few that escaped the horror returned north spreading the tale of destruction.

The children of Stiirhad, once content to live within his shadow, rose up. Their gentle rolling faces became jagged and rocky crags. Each pushed higher in hopes of eclipsing their siblings and gained the favor of Great Stiirhad. However, their actions only brought anger and pushed them further from their protector.

Great Stiirhad turned his back on his children. No longer would the gentle rain make its way along his form and continue to the north and east, providing life to the land. Instead, the land dried and died, leaving brown husks and ruins where life once thrived. Even the soil deserted the shadow of Stiirhad, choosing instead to follow the wind on its journey even farther to the east.

1. *This bit of ancestral lore was compiled from margin lore. It has been organized as close to chronological order as possible. The title "The Children of Stiirhad" has been added for descriptive purposes.*

MARKET BLESSING

Shrewd is our God and fair are His dealings
Blessings flow from the Dealmaker
Our scales are fairly weighted
And our negotiations are swift
All under the watchful eye of The Trader

Iasern, we beseech Thee to guide our dealings
May Your words form our contracts
May Your wisdom guide our transactions
And may Your blessings enrich our coffers
While depleting those of the deal-breakers

The Market is Thy temple
Each agreement made is praise unto You
Bless this Market
May the goods be free from defects
And may all obligations be met in full

This day we dedicate to you
May all of our exchanges be honorable
May the market prosper
Till the Fading light chime
Thus it shall be



Vanguard Saga of Heroes Fan Art winner 2005: "Balance" by Foxeye

FIRESIDE TALES AND LEGENDS: THE BOOK OF THESTRA

THESTRA IS THE BIRTHPLACE OF ADVENTURERS WHO CLING TO DREAMS OF CLEANSING THEIR LAND OF DANGER, WRESTING ANCIENT TREASURE FROM THE GRIP OF FEARSOME ENEMIES, AND RESTORING THE LAND'S LOST KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND PRIDE. THE OCCASIONAL SURVIVORS OF EXPEDITIONS INTO THE DEPTHS OF THESTRA RETURN WITH STORIES OF JAGGED MOUNTAINS, SHEER CLIFFS, DENSE FORESTS, STAGNANT SWAMPS TEEMING WITH UNTOLD PERILS, AND EVEN ISLANDS RUMORED TO HOLD PRECIOUS RESOURCES AND HIDDEN TREASURES.

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS THE WRITTEN TALES OF THE INHABITANTS OF THESTRA—A BIT OF FANTASY AND FABRICATION MIXED IN WITH TRUTHS.

BURGEN BRALUND

PART ONE¹

The bird landed gracefully atop a large rock. Its head tilted slightly to the side, taking in its surroundings. It sat atop a large hill. The Widow's Veil Mountains loomed imposingly over the western horizon and rolling foothills stretched out into the east. It was early in the afternoon, though dark clouds sat heavily in the sky. A cool breeze swept over the hills. It raced smoothly in and out of the many valleys, gliding through the tall green grass before winding briskly up into higher ground.

From just out of view, there was a deep curse. The bird took a few small steps forward on its rock, peering curiously in the direction of the noise. There was another curse as a large creature stalked up the side of the hill. The bird had never seen anything quite like it before, and certainly not as large. The beast stood nearly as tall as many of the small trees, which rose above the dense grass.

It had a long, weathered looking face. Deep creases lined its prominent brow and a full head of dirty brown hair fell down its head past its thick beard and onto its shoulders. It surveyed the area for a moment, its cold, grey eyes coming to a rest on the bird. It snarled and looked to a small patch of white looking goo splattered about its right shoulder. The creature's gaze shifted back to the bird. It did not look happy.



Burgen Bralund growled and cursed viciously at the bird as it flew away, soaring far out of his reach. He hated birds, especially that one. He gave the mess on his shoulder another disgusted look and did his best to wipe it off. His heavy leather tunic had seen better days, but it would survive.

Burgen did not much care for traveling. He had a nice, comfortable home and was perfectly content to stay in it. Only on rare occasions did he venture far from his own territory, but this was one of those occasions.

1. *Pages of Burgen's Travel Journal have been found and can be located in "The Travel Journal of Burgen Bralund" on page 352. The journal contains details of just before and after the account depicted here.*

It had been a long journey, but he was almost there. The half-giant had left his quiet life in the east what felt like ages ago, in search something very special. An ore so pristine whatever object was forged of its matter would never break. Supposedly. Of course, back then he had not known the only place to find it was deep in the caverns under a mountain range lands away from his own. But now, here he was, staring up at the Widow's Veil.

The half-giant frowned. The tough straps of his traveling pack wore heavily against his shoulders. He leaned on the aged stave held firmly in his right hand, its wood was strong and thick, and supported his great weight without protest.

Burgen looked back over his shoulder. He had descended from his mountain home, into the highlands and through the northern plains. The plains had taken a long while to cross but as far as Burgen was concerned, had been the most pleasant part of the journey. After the plains, he arrived in Rindol Field. That had been significantly less pleasant. The Halflings as a whole, were entirely too happy, Burgen had quickly concluded. He was very pleased to leave the uppity small people behind him.

He had met a few dwarves before and much preferred their company. So he was optimistic about arriving at his destination of Bordinar's Cleft. At least as optimistic as Burgen was capable of being.

The half-giant's foot slipped out from under him as he descended the steep hill, sending several loose rocks tumbling down in front of him. He caught himself amidst a wave of curses just in time to keep from falling.

"I hate hills," Burgen muttered dourly.

For several more hours, the half-giant trudged through the high grass in silence, occasionally interrupted by brief fits of violent shouting as errant birds ventured too close overhead for his liking. In the fading light, he could just make out the silhouette of a watch tower on a far away hill. The heavy blanket of clouds obscured the stars, making night travel near impossible.

Burgen scowled upwards and cursed the sky. "I hate clouds," he growled. He had hoped to reach Bordinar's Cleft sometime the following day, but now that would never happen. He would need to find a suitable place to make camp soon.

Burgen shot a caustic look back towards the watch tower. He had had more than his share of company in the past few days, and had no desire to walk all

the way to the tower just for more. Besides, there would almost certainly be a Halfling there.

As the ominous peaks of the Widow's Veil drew nearer and nearer, the hills began to level. Burgen found the ground he was walking upon becoming much more even and flat. He did not particularly want to sleep unguarded in a completely open area, especially near the base of mountains that were home to creatures quite fond of finding lone travelers asleep. While he was more than capable of handling himself should trouble happen to find him, he would greatly prefer to just avoid it altogether - a fact that trouble often seemed to take personally.

After a few moments of squinting about in the darkness, he found a suitable spot. Two fairly large trees had sprung from the ground next to each other. Their trunks had grown together, entwining with one another to create an arching natural wall. Burgen sat down against them, shielding himself from some of the wind.

Several small holes had been dug in and around the base of the trees. Whatever animals lived inside of them would have to share their home for tonight. The half-giant set his club-like walking stick against the entangled trunks and removed his traveling pack. He stretched for a moment and then set his head down on a soft tuft of grass.

No sooner had Burgen closed his eyes than did the wind abruptly change temperature. He felt a cold, wet drop, land on his nose. The half-giant opened a single eye and peered threateningly up at the sky. He barely had time to let out an indignant curse before a thunderous clap of lightning cracked through the clouds. The chilling sheet of rain that immediately followed soaked him almost instantly. It was going to be a long night.

He awoke sometime in the early morning. The wet grass glistened as rays of sunlight streaked out from over the hills. The rain had stopped, as had the wind for the most part, and the clouds had begun to move on. Burgen groaned wearily and opened his eyes. He was still wet, very wet. His long hair was matted across his face and drops of water fell from his beard onto his soaked tunic. Both feet lay firmly planted in a large puddle of soppy mud, which seemed to have crawled up his legs all the way to his waist during his sleep.

He pushed the hair out of his eyes and slowly stood up, muttering, taking in his surroundings. He was almost at the base of the Widow's Veil, and could see a deep crease in the mountain side that seemed to lead inward, which

meant Bordinar's Cleft was no more than a few hours away. Burgen looked down at his dripping, mud covered pants and swore. He wished he would have known that last night.

Grumbling, he snatched his traveling pack off the ground and slung it over his shoulder. The wet leather slapped loudly as it hit his back. He ignored the water dripping from the pack, grabbed his staff and once more started off towards the cleft.

PART TWO

"No, no, you're doing it all wrong!" Rungit yelled. His scraggly black beard twitched slightly. The dwarf was not pleased. He glared at his brother and business partner with impatient, grey eyes. "That is not how I showed you."

The other dwarf tossed his mining pick to the ground indignantly. "I'm doing it exactly how you showed me. Maybe you just did it wrong to begin with."

Rungit glowered angrily at that. "Farnus...", he growled back through clenched teeth, "You are worthless. Completely worthless. You are the reason we're stuck doing this to begin with. If I hadn't promised to watch after you, I'd be off trading exotic goods with elves right now, not stuck here still splitting rocks."

Farnus clenched his hand into a fist and shook it at Rungit. Like his brother, he had dark black hair and a dirty, unkempt beard. Both dwarves wore patched trousers and smudged workman's smocks over their tunics, which fit snugly on their considerable bellies.

It was early in the morning, and the blanket of dark clouds that had showered rain all over the surrounding countryside the previous night was slowly fading from view, though the ground around them was still wet and very muddy.

They stood in the center of a small valley just outside Bordinar's Cleft. Next to them, a group of large rocks sat complacently around a shadowy opening in the earth. The cave's entrance was quite tall but just wide enough for them to fit through with their equipment on.

"You're the one who borrowed all that money," Farnus accused bitterly, "I could have told you from the beginning your stupid caravan scheme would never have worked. In fact, I did tell you."

The other dwarf kicked at the pick on the ground with a heavy leather boot. "Blast it all! You know just as well as I that wasn't my fault. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Excuses are nice, but they don't really help us out now do they?"

Rungit leveled his gaze at his brother and frowned. "Then pick that back up and start digging."

"Dig here?" Farnus barked back, sweeping his arm over their surroundings in a wide stroke, "We will never find anything here. You don't know the first thing about mining."

"Well neither do you, and I say we will find something. Besides, it isn't as if you have any better ideas, is it?"

"Any idea would be better than this."

Just then, the two dwarves heard something from behind the rocks. They both stopped their bickering abruptly and stared in the direction of the noise.

Farnus shot his brother a worried look. "It couldn't be them already?" he whispered.

"They said we had another week," Rungit responded quietly, "it can't be."

They leaned in closer, listening. The noise sounded wet, heavy thumps followed closely by loud squishes. It continued at regular intervals for several seconds, and then stopped. A deep voice took its place, the voice did not sound happy. It cursed at something momentarily and then trailed off in a fit of muttering. Farnus held his breath as he quietly knelt down to retrieve the mining pick at his feet. It was not much, but it was the only defense they had.

Then, from around the rocks the source of the noise trudged into view. It towered over the dwarves, standing over twice as high as either of them and carried a giant, gnarled looking club which it appeared to be using as a walking stick. It's long, stringy brown hair was matted across its worn face. It was covered to the waist in mud and dripping wet.

Rungit looked up to the stranger. "Hello there," he called out nervously.



Burgen glared down at the two dwarves in front of him. He had been walking all morning and after a long night of cold rain, was still very tired. He eyed the mining pick in Rungit's hand. Burgen did not want to have to go into the dwarven city unless he absolutely had to. He hated cities. One dwarf was as good as any other, he figured.

"Are you miners?" he asked bluntly.

Rungit looked confused for a moment, then glanced to the pick and quickly back up to Burgen. "Why yes, yes we are," he replied uneasily. "We don't see your kind around here too often."

"Are you for hire?"

The dwarf's eyes lit up and a broad grin spread across his dirty face. "Absolutely, my friend," he said smoothly, "And as luck would have it, we are the best miners in all of the Widow's Veil. Nowhere will you find two as skilled as us."

"But-" Farnus began to protest, but was quickly shushed by his brother.

"My name is Rungit and this is my esteemed colleague Farnus," he said gesturing towards the other dwarf. "What may we call you?"

Burgen narrowed his eyes down at the dwarf in front of him. He hated smooth talkers. "How about boss?" he said.

"Very well then, boss," Rungit replied with a smile. "How then, can we help you?"

The half giant set his club down on the ground and swung his traveling pack off from around his shoulders. Drops of water still fell from its wet corners. He rummaged through the pack for a moment, and then emerged with a large piece of folded, stained parchment. He wrung the wet paper out for a second and then un-crumpled it. A large, detailed map of the region had been drawn onto one side. He knelt down next to the dwarf.

"I need cobalt. The only place to find pure veins is right here," Burgen said, pointing to a small mark on the map. "Do you know where that is?"

Rungit studied the parchment intently for a moment, scratching at his dark beard. Then his face sank. "As a matter of fact I do," he said, his voice ripe with disappointment. Farnus silently crept up behind his brother and peered

over his shoulder at the map. His eyes widened in surprise when he spotted where the mark lay.

“Good.” Burgen replied, ignoring the dwarves' obvious despair. “How quickly can you get me there?”

“It is about a day's journey away, but its not that easy I'm afraid.” Rungit explained.

“Why is that?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, boss,” Farnus spoke up. “But nobody goes there. It is far too dangerous. All sorts of unpleasant creatures live there.”

The half-giant frowned and looked back down to his map. “Do you know anywhere else to find pure cobalt then?” he asked, with a somewhat annoyed expression.

The two dwarves looked at each other for a moment, and then shook their heads. “I'm afraid not,” Farnus said.

“Do you know of anyone who does?”

“Unfortunately no,” Rungit replied nervously, “That really isn't the sort of thing one tends to share with a lot of people.”

Burgen's frowned deepened. He narrowed his eyes down at the two dwarves, as if considering something. After a moment, he set the map aside and reached back into his pack, pulling out a large pouch. Its top was tied in a tight knot, but it appeared to be very full. He muttered something under his breath and tossed it towards the dwarves.

As soon as the pouch had left the half-giant's hand, Rungit recognized the unmistakable jingling of coins from inside. He snatched it from the air and eagerly untied the knot, Farnus peering in over his shoulder. As he looked inside the pouch, his eyes widened. He looked back to his brother, who was staring mouth agape at the large golden coins that were nearly spilling out of the top.

“And another one just like it after I get when I need.” Burgen stated flatly, “You worry about getting me the cobalt and I will worry about everything else.” He gave his club a suggestive look.

"Would you be so kind as to give us a brief moment to discuss this?" Rungit asked politely, managing to wrestle his eyes away from the coins.

"Make it quick. I want to get moving."

"Of course," the dwarf replied. He turned back to Farnus. "I told you it would all work out. This would actually be enough to pay them off and then some," he whispered excitedly.

"Are you mad?" Farnus shot back quietly, "All the gold in the world won't do us any good if we get killed."

"And what do you think is going to happen to us if we don't get this gold?" he replied sharply.

"I don't like it." Farnus muttered.

Rungit growled. "We don't have any other options"

Farnus threw his hands up in the air. "But we aren't even miners!"

"We've got all the tools, how hard can it be?" He turned back to the half giant and spread his arms warmly, smiling up at him. "It's a deal, boss."

PART THREE

Rungit scratched at his dirty beard and eyed the map worriedly. His brother stood next to him, a confused expression on his face. They stood in a steep, sloping ridge of large boulders deep within the Widow's Veil Peaks. It had been three days since the half-giant had hired them as guides to the cobalt deposit, and for those three days they had marched continually south... for the most part, at least. Burgen had taken the delays in stride, but appeared to be quickly losing his patience.

All around them jagged mountains sprang from the earth, towering up into the sky. Rungit turned the map a bit, examining it.

"This map can't be accurate," he muttered under his breath.

Farnus pointed towards one particularly distinctively shaped peak. "That sort of looks like it," he observed.

Rungit shook his head. "It can't be."

“Are you two nearly finished?” Burgen called out from several dozen paces back. “There are only a few hours of daylight left. If we're as close as you say I'd like to keep moving.” There was a challenging tone to the half-giant's voice.

“Just another minute,” Rungit shouted back, a nervous smile on his face, “And we'll be off.”

Farnus gulped. “Do you think he knows we're lost?”

“If he isn't beginning to suspect it, he will soon.”

“Maybe we should leave tonight while he's asleep,” the dwarf offered.

“And go where? Back to Bordinar's? I think he'd probably look there.” Rungit responded sourly, “Besides, this is the only way we'll get the money. You have seen how tightly he holds that pack when he sleeps. There is no way we could get it without waking him up.”

“Well how much farther south are we going to go?” Farnus asked seriously, “You realize we're dangerously close to the dead's territory.”

“Of course I realize that, do you think I am an idiot? We haven't seen any yet though, and so long as we stay on the eastern side of the mountains we should be fine.”

Farnus narrowed his eyes. “I think this is a bad.”

The other dwarf was about to respond, but was interrupted as Burgen trudged over from where he had been sitting. “Time to go,” he stated.

“Yes, of course.” Rungit said, smiling at the half-giant. “My associate and I were just discussing how to best avoid any unwanted meetings with the dead.”

“They're on the other side of the mountains, right?” Burgen asked simply.

“You are correct, boss.” Farnus chimed in.

“And the cobalt is on this side, right?”

The dwarves nodded.

"Then what is there to discuss?" Burgen was beginning to doubt the wisdom of hiring the first two dwarves he had found. It was too late to change his mind now though. They had said it would take only a day to reach the caverns in which the cobalt deposit lay. That had been three days ago. If he did not know any better, he would think the dwarves had gotten themselves lost.

Rungit grinned a bit sheepishly and clapped his hands together. "Right you are, boss. We are just a bit overly cautious sometimes, our one failing. Let's go."

Burgen surveyed the mountains all around him, peering out into the grey sky. "How much farther are the caverns?"

The dwarves exchanged a doubtful look.

"We're getting very close, boss," Rungit assured the half-giant, "Don't worry."

About midway through the next day, the half-giant did in fact begin to worry. Only Burgen had a tendency to worry aloud, very vulgarly at times. His violent outbursts, in turn, worried the dwarves.

"You are lost." Burgen accused the two, his voice ripe with disgust. "Are you sure you aren't Halflings?"

Rungit glanced uneasily at their surroundings. They stood in a place very similar looking to the one in which they had rested yesterday. In fact, everything looked much the same as it had before. The dwarf was sure they had traveled a good distance but could not tell the difference between one mountain and the next.

He held up his hands defensively as the half-giant stalked towards him. "Lost may not quite be the right word, boss," he said, "We did get a little off track, but we are well on our way to the cavern now. I assure you."

"That's what you said two days ago," Burgen growled through clenched teeth. He towered over the dwarf, glowering down at him angrily.

"The Widow's Veil are tricky mountains to try and find your way through," Rungit began to explain. But he was cut short by a frantic cry from his brother.

"There!" Farnus yelled, pointing up at a steep ledge.

Burgen pulled his gaze away from the dwarf and looked. "What?"

"That crack! It's an entrance to a cavern!" he said excitedly.

The half-giant squinted and gazed critically at the spot to where Farnus was pointing. Rungit clasped his hands together and grinned broadly.

"Well then," he said, "that must be it."

Burgen glared back down at the dwarf. "For your sake, it had better be."

"It's not even that far," Farnus said cheerfully.

The half-giant rubbed his eyes wearily with one large, calloused hand and shook his head. "It is much farther than it looks."

Rungit eyed the ledge upon which the crack rested appraisingly. "We can get there by nightfall," he declared confidently.

Burgen was not convinced. "If we're lucky," he said as they began to make their way towards the crack. He had his doubt this was even the right cavern, but decided if they got up on that ledge and it turned out to be the wrong spot he could always just throw the dwarves off it. He caught himself grinning at that prospect.

"I knew we were getting close." Rungit said pleasantly, "This is the spot, I can feel it." He noticed the half-giant's expression. "See," he observed, "You're cheering up already."

"I'm thinking about what I am going to do to you if this isn't the right cavern." Burgen replied dryly. The dwarves' smiles faded quite abruptly.

It soon grew dark. Moonlight illuminated the Widow's Veil with an almost eerie glow. The peaks were oddly silent, not a solitary bird or animal could be heard calling out in the distance. It did not appear to upset Burgen in the least, but the dwarves had a very worried expression about them as they pressed on into the brisk night.

Several hours of rigid hiking later, they stood at the base of the ledge. It was elevated a goodly distance off the ground. The edge jutted out from the mountainside several feet out of the reach of the half-giant.

Farnus eyed the ledge with a bit of trepidation. "This probably is not the best time to bring this up, but I am not a very strong climber."

"I'll go up and lower a rope," Burgen said. He set his club down against the rocks. "Hold onto that for me."

For someone of the half-giant's stature, the climb was not exceptionally difficult. He struggled to find a grip a few times but within a couple of minutes, he had pulled himself up onto the ledge.

There was not a lot of room to maneuver. He carefully knelt down and removed his traveling pack. As he began to pull out a portion of rope, he heard something from inside the crack. He gazed intently into the darkness, trying to identify the source of the noise.

"Is everything all right up there?" Rungit called out from down below.

Burgen looked back down at the dwarves. He could barely see them in the moonlight. "One second," he said, "I thought I heard something."

He turned back towards the entrance to the cave and flinched back involuntarily, sending several small bits of rock tumbling off the side of the ledge. He was staring directly into the points of a half dozen spears. Behind them, angry eyes glared out at him from the darkness. He cursed.

PART FOUR

Burgen eyed the spearheads cautiously. There were six, to be exact, all of which were leveled directly at his head. They appeared to be metal, but whoever made them had certainly not taken their time. The crude tips were bound haphazardly to the shafts with dirty leather straps and appeared ready to fall off at any moment.

The half-giant slowly eased himself up off his knees and stood towering over the outthrust spears. He raised a curious eyebrow and tried to peer into the shadowy cave. The creatures wielding the spears slowly emerged from the darkness into the moonlight. They did not look much better than their weapons. They were small... very small. Their wiry, rust-colored bodies were hunched forward over the spears they clutched tightly in their thin, sinewy hands. The creatures sneered at Burgen with narrow, beady eyes and slowly advanced. The half-giant cursed under his breath. They were kobolds. He hated kobolds.

One of them took a small step forward. It had odd-colored markings on its face—the leader perhaps. It growled fiercely at Burgen, keeping its spear pointed neatly at his midsection. “Drop your treasure!” it demanded.

Burgen instinctively reached for his club, but came up empty. He had left it below with the dwarves. His patience exhausted, he muttered under his breath and glared down at the kobolds. They suddenly appeared to be much less sure of themselves.

“You’re joking, right?” he asked flatly.

The marked kobold looked back to its comrades, the sharp-toothed grin fading from its face and replaced with a look of confusion.

“Drop your treasure,” it demanded again, but this time with a slight hesitation.

Burgen folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. “Absolutely not,” he said. “Why don’t you drop your treasure?”

The kobolds exchanged uneasy glances. They seemed to be struggling with the question of who outnumbered whom.

“What’s going on up there, boss?” Rungit yelled from down below. “I hear talking.”

One of the kobolds risked a quick peak off the side of the ledge at the dwarves on the ground. That was all the time Burgen needed. In one smooth motion, he snatched the creature’s crude spear from its grasp and thumped it painfully in the stomach with his boot, sending the kobold sprawling backward into the cave.

After a brief moment of surprise, the others charged at the half-giant. He turned the spears aside easily, managing to break one in the process.

“Nothing really,” Burgen called out, kicking another kobold out of his way. “Just dealing with some of the locals.”

“Do you want our help, boss?” Farnus shouted up, as one of the creatures jumped onto the half-giant’s back and began to climb toward his head.

Burgen reached around and grabbed the kobold off his back. “Sure,” he yelled dryly as he swung the flailing creature at one of the others. He let go

just before impact and watched as they both sailed screaming over the ledge. The hapless kobolds hit the ground below with a heavy thud.

The half-giant could not help but grin at the dwarves' startled exclamations as the two kobolds came raining down upon them. They were quickly followed by a third, and a fourth, as one by one Burgen booted the creatures off the ledge until just he and the leader remained.

The half-giant glowered down at the terrified kobold before him. It still held its spear defensively, although did not seem to be overly sure of its usefulness at this point.

"That was brilliant," Burgen observed biting.

"This not your land!" the kobold spat furiously. "What you want with Rogg land?"

"Rogg land?" The half-giant could hear the dwarves below cursing as they pulled the other kobolds off the rocks while they tried to frantically climb back up. "What is that?"

"This Rogg land!" the kobold stomped. "Rogg!" he cried out.

"Rogg!" the kobolds below echoed.

Burgen blinked and rubbed his temples with one large hand. "Look, I don't want your land. I'm looking for cobalt. Do you know what that is?"

The creature's face contorted into a twisted, toothy grin as it smirked in understanding. "You want the blue stone," it said. "You won't find."

"Unless you want me to burn Rogg land to the ground," he leaned in close to the kobold, "you had better hope I do."

"You will die. Blue stone in death land!"

Burgen hated kobolds. How they were able to continue to survive despite being so remarkably stupid was, to him, a miracle of nature. "Death land?" he asked, unimpressed.

"The blue stone deep in tunnels. But it not alone. Death lives in tunnels too."

“That would probably be why you call it death land, wouldn't it?” Burgen said dryly. “What is your name?”

The kobold puffed up its chest, in a vain attempt to look menacing. “I Granog, King of Rogg land.” The half-giant rolled his eyes.

“Granog, I'll make you a deal,” he said reaching into his traveling pack. His hand emerged with a small bag bound tightly at the top. The kobold's ears perked up at the unmistakable jingling of coins from inside. “I was going to give this to the dwarves down there, but they're idiots. If you can show me to the blue stone, it's yours.”

With that, Burgen opened the top of the bag and held it low enough for Granog to see. The kobold's eyes widened as he gazed greedily at the gold coins. After a moment, he peered back up at the half-giant.

“Granog will show you the blue stone,” he said slyly, “But no tricks!”

PART FIVE

Convincing the two dwarves and the kobolds not to kill each other was no small feat. To be quite honest, Burgen really didn't care one way or the other but insisted, quite vehemently, that they wait until after he'd gotten the cobalt to see who could kill whom first. It was not an entirely popular decision, but arguing with the disgruntled half-giant was an even less popular choice.

It had taken far too long for Burgen's liking to get the rest of the kobolds and dwarven brothers back up onto the ledge. The half-giant lowered his rope for them to scurry up, but it took several minutes for the creatures to figure out that going up the rope all at once was not conducive to a successful climb.

Once they were all crowded against the cave entrance on the ledge, Burgen looked down amongst the chattering group at his feet. “Be quiet,” he ordered.

“Sorry about that boss,” Rungit replied, looking up at him. “It's just that these kobolds are pretty stupid. I was trying to ask them how far in the cobalt is but they keep babbling some nonsense about haunted tunnels.”

“Typical kobolds,” Farnus said, shaking his head, “Afraid of everything.”

Granog scowled at the dwarf and shook his spear. "Granog afraid of nothing!" he growled viciously. The dwarves snickered to one another, looking quite smug. At that, the kobold became enraged and lunged outwards at the brothers violently.

Burgen sighed as he reached down, catching the kobold by the back of his neck mid attack. He gave the dwarves a withering look. "You can be replaced," he said before turning back towards the cave. He gave Granog a light toss towards the entrance. The kobold landed precariously on his feet and stumbled into the cave. "Lets go," Burgen ordered impatiently.

"Our apologies, boss," Rungit said as the trekked into the darkness. "It won't happen again."

"It had better not," the half giant replied. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the dim light in the tunnel. They paused for a moment as Rungit and Farnus each lit a torch, illuminating the inside of the cavern. The ground beneath him sloped downward, and large stalactites hung from the cave's ceiling. Burgen had to hunch over to avoid running into them. It suddenly occurred to him that the kobolds could fit a great many places that he could not.

"Granog," he said after several minutes of descending into the mountain. The kobold leader held up his hand, and the rest of the creatures stopped. He looked back towards the half-giant.

"How big is the area the cobalt is located in?"

Granog gave Burgen a confused look.

"Will I be able to fit?" he said, a tad embarrassed.

The kobold gave him an appraising look, and seemed to be thinking deeply for a few moments before finally shrugging. "Could be yes, could be no," he said.

"That helps," Burgen replied dryly.

He continued to march through the caves, listening to the dwarves bickering with each other for what seemed like an eternity. Several times, the tunnel narrowed and shrank, often to the point where Burgen was forced to crawl on his hands and knees before then opening up again into wide and spacious caverns.

“For someplace that is supposed to be haunted, this is actually quite nice,” Rungit observed while they passed through one such cavern.

“How much farther is it, Granog?” Burgen asked.

“Close,” the kobold hissed, “very close.”

At the edge of the cavern, three tunnels split off into different directions. Two of the tunnels were quite large. The half-giant would have no problem walking upright through them. The third, however, was significantly smaller. Burgen eyed it dubiously.

“It's that one isn't it?” he asked, pointing towards the small tunnel.

Granog nodded his head and started for it, the other kobolds following closely behind their leader. Just before entering, Granog turned back, his large eyes narrowing into a cautious squint. “Blue stone lies through here,” he said and pointed towards the half-giant. “You go first.”

Burgen knelt down and peered into the hole in the wall. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to fit all the way through. Cursing under his breath he lowered himself to the cavern floor and began to slide into the tunnel, holding his large club out in front of him.

“Don't worry boss,” Rungit said in a comforting tone, “We're right behind you.”

Burgen wondered silently if he could kick the dwarf from where he lay. He muttered to himself as he continued to inch his way into the tunnel. It seemed to be getting narrower and tighter the farther he went in. He removed his traveling pack, pushing it in front of him yet his back still scraped against the rock above. He couldn't see anything. The dwarves had the torches behind him and his large form was blocking the light from seeping through. With a grunt, he tried to pull himself farther into the tunnel. He did not budge.

He grumbled and tried again, this time harder. His shoulders rubbed painfully against the hard rocks around him, but again, he did not move. He cursed. He was stuck.

“You all right up there, boss?” he heard Rungit call out from behind him.

He gritted his teeth. "I'm stuck," he called back. He thought he heard laughing, he wasn't sure from whom.

"Do you want us to push?" Farnus asked.

Burgen exhaled slowly, letting all the air drain from his lungs. There was no way he was going to let them push. With a dreadful resolve, he took hold of the wall in front of him and pulled forward with all his strength. He felt the rough fabric of his tunic begin to tear away as he slowly slid forward until finally he felt openness.

He rubbed his shoulders as he dragged himself out of the tunnel and stood up in the cavern. Thin bits of light shone from out from the tunnel behind him, illuminating slivers of the cave. He could not see much, but it looked to be quite large.

One by one, the kobolds followed by the two dwarves emerged next to him. They slid through the small opening with ease and dusted themselves off as they took in their new surroundings. As the dwarves emerged from the tunnels the light from their torches poured into the cave.

They stood in a large cavern, probably the biggest they had been in yet. All over the walls small tunnels twisted off and ran deeper into the mountains. Some were large enough for the half-giant to fit through, but most were not. It was impossible to tell how far they went or if they even lead anywhere at all.

Granog looked around cautiously. "The blue stone be here," he said.

Burgen peered into the cavern. "I don't see anything."

Granog raced over to one of the holes, it led straight down into the ground. He pointed at it. "Here," he said, keeping his voice low.

The half-giant looked down at the hole. It was much too small for him to go in. "You weren't sure if I'd be able to fit in that? How much farther is it?"

The kobolds looked about the caves nervously. "Not so loud!" Granog warned. "They will hear you."

Burgen scowled down at the kobold. He did not have the patience for this. The two dwarves walked over and began to examine the hole. Farnus leaned

over carefully, and flicked his torch forward sharply, sending several burning bits of reed falling down into the darkness.

After a moment, the dwarf's face brightened. "I can see the bottom," he said cheerfully.

"Good," the half-giant responded. He handed Rungit his traveling pack, "Fill this. And be quick about it."

"Sure thing, boss," the dwarf replied. After securing their rope to a large rock, the dwarves began to lower themselves in to the hole and out of sight. A few moments later, the rope stopped moving and the half-giant heard Rungit's excited voice echo up through the tunnel. "The little beast was right. It's everywhere down here. We'll get to work right away, boss."

Just then, Burgen heard a low moan from behind him. He looked back over his shoulder towards the kobolds. They stood huddled together, chattering fearfully in their native tongue to one another. "Was that one of you?" the half-giant asked.

"Granog told you!" he whispered harshly, "They will hear!"

The kobold looked as if it were about to say something else, but was cut short by another moan. The group took one look into the darkness behind them and then dashed back towards the tunnel they'd come from. Burgen started to protest, but realized he didn't really need them anymore anyway. If they wanted to leave, let them leave. One less thing he had to worry about.

The loud clanging of the dwarves' tools echoed up through the hole and into the cavern. Burgen turned around to peer back down at them when he heard the sound again. He looked up in the direction it came from. Towards the back of the cavern, he thought he saw movement in one of the shadowy tunnels. He snatched up the remaining torch, tightened his grip on his club and took a step forward to investigate.

Whatever it was in the shadows continued to stagger forward. It let out low, prolonged moans until it finally emerged into the light. Burgen narrowed his eyes at the creature standing across the cavern floor. It appeared to be human, or at least had been human at one point. Now strips of flesh hung off its body. Its eyes were sunken back into its head and most of the skin on its face appeared to have rotted away. It shuffled forward, keeping its dead eyes locked coldly on the half-giant. This must have been what Granog was talking

about. He was not terribly surprised. They were near the border of the dead territory, after all.

Burgen shrugged and stalked towards the creature, readying his club. As he came near, it reeled back, as to attack him but with one quick, mighty strike the half-giant sent the ghoul crashing broken into the ground. Burgen glared down at the jumbled mess of flesh and bones before him and grinned. He had rather enjoyed that.

Then he heard more shuffling - this time from the opposite end of the cavern. He whirled around to see three more shapes emerging from the tunnels. He stomped over and quickly dispatched them in much the same fashion.

As he finished crushing the third walking corpse against the hard rocks he saw more shuffling out of the tunnels directly in front of him. Ten, maybe a dozen emerged into the light out of the large holes in the wall. They all staggered towards him, the same dead looks on their faces.

"How much more time are you going to need?" he shouted out to the dwarves.

"We're working as fast as we can boss," came Rungit's reply. "What's the rush?"

Burgen smashed the skull of one of the dead with a powerful blow from his club. "Just try to quicken it up a little," he said, whirling around to meet another of the ghouls. For several minutes Burgen fought the small crowd of dead, brutally crushing each of them into the hard, rocky floor until their disfigured corpses scattered about the ground were all that remained.

He panted and wiped a bit of sweat from his brow. That had actually been sort of fun. Burgen's amusement was short lived, however, as soon more of the dead began to stagger out of the tunnels. Lots more. Dozens of figures lurched forward now, streaming into the cavern from out of the darkness.

Burgen cursed and looked down into the dwarves' hole. "That cobalt had better be pristine," he shouted. Muttering, he set the torch down on the cavern floor, gripped his club tightly in both hands and waited. "I hate zombies."

“THE CHAMBER”

The chamber under the dome was most often empty, but every day for the past week it had seen a flurry of activity. Again, this morning, the frail robed figure stood in the archway, leaning on an ornate wooden staff. Every day his brow seemed to become more deeply creased, and the dark, sagging circles beneath his eyes grew larger.

Behind the aged man, his companions filtered into the chamber. Half the seats that circled the large oval table before them still stood vacant, but even so, angry voices filled the room.

“What are you thinking!?” bellowed a voice, “It's obviously been put through some kind of decryption!”

“That's ENcryption, you dolt!” came the reply in a shrill voice. “And no, it hasn't.”

“Five, six, two!” the first voice argued, “translates, obviously, to meridian...”

“Really? Well if everything is so obvious, then what, praytell, is the solution?”

The man in the archway sighed and closed his eyes. More men, all at least as frail as he and nearly as aged, poured into the room.

“The white crow only flies on Tuesdays”, a short bald man stated. “We know that much at least, let's carry on from there.”

“No, no, no,” another interrupted, “The secret is in the number! It must be!” He pointed to one of many scraps of parchment spread unevenly across the table. “If this number represents any information it should be of use to us.”

“Where did this number come from?” asked a pale shell of a man in a blue robe. “Was it with the other items or off by itself somewhere?”

“No way of knowing,” came the answer from across the room. “Jeric won't even so much as hint at where he and his mob of miscreants found any of this. Probably some elaborate hoax, I'm guessing.” The speaker scowled and grumbled, “Were it not for his influence with the crown we wouldn't be

sequestered in our own tower chasing this ridiculous riddle." Several of the men nodded in agreement.

"But allow me to point something out here," the man continued, "Most of the pieces that were intact are misshapen, all but this one." The man reached out with a slender, but solid-looking staff and pointed across the table at a perfectly square piece of parchment.

"Truly, my effect on this forum cannot go unnoticed now!" interrupted the man who had first spoken. "After all, I translated the first sequence... and for what it's worth, I agree the square-ness is very likely to be significant."

The shrill voice piped up again. "Nonsense! You've translated nothing! The fragment seems too cryptic and long for that drivel you call an interpretation. Your numeric enigmas are nothing more than wild speculation... Are you going to tell us where you came up with this? I suspect it's some half-baked crackpot scheme that wouldn't reveal my mother's recipe for soup!"

Behind them, the last of the participants entered the room and the doors swung closed. The figure in the archway opened his eyes and forced a determined expression. He took a deep breath, turned, and strode into the room. As he reached the head of the table he forcefully rapped his staff on the polished stone floor.

"Enough!" he belted in a tone much more commanding than his little frame seemed capable of.

"Perhaps some of you are not fully aware of our present situation, though I couldn't imagine how the facts might escape you. Allow me to refresh what is left of your memories." What had begun as a loud proclamation now descended into a seething whisper, barely audible to those across the room. He placed his hands on the table and leaned far forward.

"We, the most enlightened in the land, have not made a single significant discovery in nearly a decade!" His drawn face was reddening as he continued, "This man Jeric, and his followers, have been recovering artifacts for years now - things we cannot even understand, let alone recreate. I had hoped that his spirit of adventure would have gotten him killed by now, but he continues make us look foolish and incompetent."

He paused and scanned the room, looking each of his companions in the eye. "They're making a mockery of us! And if this continues, we will be dismissed. We'll be sent to continue our studies from the stables on the outskirts

of town! Our library, our very sanctum, will be handed over to the priests, or worse, turned into some auction-house for the common dregs.”

No one spoke for a moment. The man straightened and slowly began to pace around the table behind his seated companions. “Do not squander this opportunity by bickering with one another. If we do not succeed here we may not be given another chance to...”

A knock at one of the doors interrupted him. “Enter!” he commanded.

A young fellow dressed in tower livery entered the room and approached him. He pulled his hand from inside his tunic and stretched it forth, offering a piece of parchment.

“My lord, this was recovered from inside one of the scabbards.” He said, bowing his head slightly. “The captain told me to inform you that everything has been thoroughly searched now. There is nothing more.”

The robed man gently received the parchment and looked to the courier. “Be gone,” he said sharply.

As the newest parchment was laid out next to the others, the discourse began anew. Most of what was said was drowned out by the drone of several simultaneous discussions, with only a few remarks rising above the din.

“The other combinations made even less sense... So guess it's not related to the words”

...

“If that is just coincidence, that is amazing!”

...

“I don't think the original number corresponds to words in the text. After counting I tried matching them up using various combinations...”

...

“I never said it meant anything, only that it's very interesting”

...

"I also have a feeling that if it did translate into words, it would be more of a statement"

The muttering and conjecturing went on for what seemed to be hours and then slowly died down as each of the men sat back and pondered the cryptic, seemingly unrelated information that lay before them. After another hour of raising eyebrows and stroking beards, one of them broke the silence.

"Shouldn't our lunch be here by now?" he asked.

Before anyone could respond, the main doors of the chamber blew open revealing a tall man. Scale mail armor of finer craftsmanship than any man of this age possessed covered his chest, leaving his muscular arms bare. A weathered cloak draped from his shoulders, nearly touching the ground behind him. Startled looks accompanied the jolts and twitches of the room's occupants as the newcomer walked deliberately towards the elderly figure at the head of the table.

The old man just managed to stand before the intruder reached him. "What an unexpected surprise," he said, bowing his head. "Sir Jeri-

"Just Jeric will do fine," the tall man interrupted. "I have come to hear the interpretation of the parchments my men and I were able to recover. Without doubt the distinguished academy has completed their task, having been given a full week. I simply couldn't bear to wait for a formal response."

There was no immediate reply as the loremaster collected himself.

A faint smile touched the corners of Jeric's mouth as the sages squirmed uncomfortably in their seats.

"You have completed the task, haven't you Bormin?" Jeric asked.

"Not entirely..." Bormin stammered, "I believe the work is nearly through... just a few - "

"Really?" Jeric asked, feigning surprise. "Then by all means, show me what you can."

The loremaster was clearly uncomfortable, "There are still numerous theories, Sir-

“THE CHAMBER”

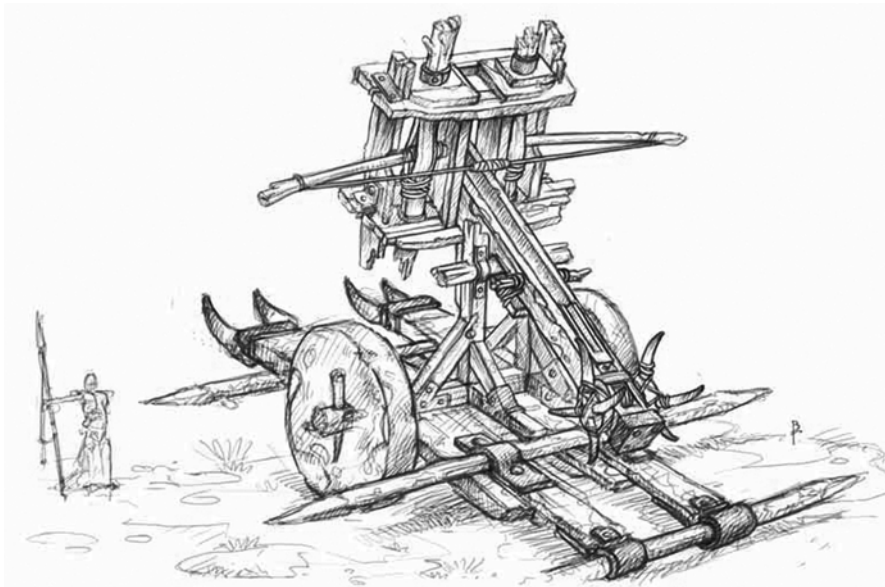
“Theories?” Jeric exclaimed. “You have only theories? We did not endure unspeakable horrors and incredible hardship to listen to your theories... lore-master!”

Bormin began to form a response, but not in time. Jeric continued as he unrolled a scroll of leather and began placing the scraps of parchment on top of it.

“You and your band of withered old crows sit safely in your lofty perch, while those who have courage risk their lives for our people.”

Bormin wasn't even trying to speak now. When Jeric had placed the last of the scraps on the leather, he carefully rolled it back up and placed it in a fold in his cloak. As he stormed out of the chamber, he shot a last remark at the stifled occupants.

“I'll find the answer myself, and I'll have it before the new moon.”



THE COIN

If the many tales - including this one - are to be believed, there once was a kingdom far beyond all the known lands.² Within this kingdom stood a great city, sprawling across the landscape and extending the power of the king far and wide. During the height of the kingdom's age, a small boy walked the main road leading into the city. He slogged in the mud by the side as peasants, wagons laden with goods, and knights on great warhorses passed in and out of the bustling city.

The boy's bare foot touched something in the mud, and he bent to pick it up. Brushing some of the mud off on his shirt, he saw that it was a coin. He glanced around quickly to see if anyone was watching, and then broke into a grin as he looked toward the city.

The many possibilities for the money swam in the boy's head as he wandered between the shops of the city proper. His stomach grumbled loudly beneath his filthy shirt and gaunt ribs. Just as he was about to spend the money on an apple, another idea struck him. With the coin clenched tightly in his fist, he ran as fast as his little legs would carry him across the city to the stables. Inside, the boy found a stable hand not much older than himself.

"P...p...please..." The boy tried to catch his breath, wondering if the stable hand would oust him before he could finish a sentence. "Please sir, could I have a ride on a horse?" He rushed through the words, eyes wide at his own inexcusable folly for even considering such a thing.

"You want what?"

"Just a short ride, sir. I've got this money, you see. I've got this money and if I could trouble you..."

With a grin the stable hand snatched the coin from the boy's hand. "If you never tell a soul and are quick about it, I'll let you sit on one of the lieutenants' war steeds!"

The boy agreed vigorously, and soon he was atop a great horse towering over all he could see.

2. *Vanguard Saga of Heroes Fan Fiction* winner 2005: Published with gracious permission from the author, Fozzik.

The stable hand finished his work and headed quickly to the shops. He felt the coin in his pocket every few steps to be sure it was still there. He purchased a sweetbread, knowing he would have to finish it quickly and run home doubly fast before he was missed. The merchant stopped him before he'd gone a step.

"What's this? An awfully dirty coin, isn't it?" The hefty man scratched at it, trying to clear the grime. The stable hand stared in horror, wondering if it was a coin at all, and knowing he would fight to the death to retain the sweetbread he was already stuffing in his mouth.

"Oh, off with you boy. I'm sure it's fine."

The stable hand left the shop in a rush, nearly pushing over a farmer who was on his way in with a huge armful of sacks. The farmer dropped the load heavily on the counter and sighed.

"That's the last of it, I believe. Tell me, what word is there from the eastern border?"

The shopkeeper began stacking the sacks behind the counter. "The east? You've heard of the fighting then?"

"Of course. Some say..." The farmer nervously dropped his voice. "Some say the beasts have amassed a great force and are preparing to overtake the kingdom."

"It's true enough." The shopkeeper winced, his own voice low. "I wouldn't fear, though. The king's army is alerted now, and I've heard that the prince may be leading them afield."

"The prince!" The farmer breathed. The military skill and wisdom of the king's son was well known. "That is good news! Well, I must be off. There's just the matter of payment..." He blinked meaningfully with his hand outstretched.

The merchant finished his stacking and dropped the coin, along with several others, into the farmer's hand. The farmer returned to his wagon and turned the horse toward the main gate of the city. A moment later he remembered to count the money he had received. Thoughts of the coming war and the prince were pushed aside as he fingered the coins in his palm.

A procession of knights on horseback nearly collided with the wagon which the farmer had inadvertently driven directly into the center of the road.

"Move aside! We ride on the king's business!" A sturdy man glared through his visor, bright plate armor gleaming in the sun.

A squire left the side of his knight, and helped the farmer to turn the cart and move it out of the path of the soldiers. The farmer tossed him the coin in thanks, and continued on his way. The squire rushed back, not wanting to fall behind.

"Look sir! That farmer gave me a coin for helping him."

The knight took the coin, eyed it and then tossed it in a saddle bag. The squire grimaced and scratched his head, knowing better than to speak.

After a week's ride the soldiers reached their weary comrades, and were shocked at what they found. The great hordes had pushed the king's army back several leagues into the kingdom, and a great many wounded filled the small tents.

Only a single day after the rested troops arrived, the camp was overrun by hundreds of the beasts. Despite a valiant fight by the king's soldiers who were caught unprepared, none of them survived.

The beasts looted the bodies for anything that appeared valuable or useful. Most of the armor and weapons were taken in moments. An archer, small for his breed, managed to find the single coin in the saddlebag. He scratched at it with one claw, and then bit it hard between his sharpened front teeth. He hurried back to his camp and dropped the coin into a small pot over the fire.

The molten coin was poured into a mold for a particularly nasty arrowhead.

The war raged and grew, and slowly the horde advanced. The king's army was spread overly thin and outnumbered. One day, as defeat loomed over the heads of the soldiers, word spread that the prince had arrived. A huge force rode with him, and the armies took heart. The prince began planning immediately, and found a weakness in the Beasts' defenses.

A massive battle commenced, lasting for days, as the horde of monsters was pushed steadily back. Just as the tide began to turn in favor of the king's army, the prince was struck in the back by an arrow, and fell unconscious from his horse. He was rushed back to the great city and the royal healers.

The prince's health improved steadily as news of continued victories reached him from the borders of the kingdom. The arrowhead which had pierced his armor with ease intrigued him, and he decided to keep it. He had it worked by a master blacksmith into a beautiful pendant.

Days of rest passed into weeks... The healers discovered that the prince's wound was not closing. They cautioned him against returning to battle, and were proven right as his health began to decline. Nothing the healers could do made any change. It was believed that an unknown poison was at work, and the prince grew delirious with fever.

Late one night, the prince's fever broke and he was lucid enough to speak. The king summoned his lieutenants to the prince's side, knowing time was short.

The prince spoke to the knight who was commanding the armies, and asked for a great victory over the hordes as his dying wish. He then sank slowly to the pillow, breathing his last.

The king was the only other person to know where the prince's pendant had come from. In his grief, he took it from around his son's neck and donned it, to remind him of the loss and the great cost of war.

The king's army soon heard of the prince's words and of his death, and they marshaled all their strength. The war raged for months, but never again did the great horde of beasts cross the borders into the kingdom successfully.

At long last, the war was won. The king's steady leadership returned the land to prosperity in short order, and never once during the passing years did he remove his son's pendant. When finally the weary king laid his crown beside the bed for the last time, his people gathered a long procession. The tradition was to commit the body of the king to the great pyres near the western sea.

As the massive gilded coach on which the king laid left the city, a stone in the road caused it to lurch. The cord around the dead king's neck slipped its knot, and the pendant dropped to the ground unnoticed.

It rolled, toppled end over end, and came to rest in the mud at the side of the road.

THE FOUNDLING

“Get up, Tresh! Stay quiet!” whispered Loric urgently. “Nothing is stirring in the woods. There are orcs about.”

As Tresh sat up, his blanket fell away. The crisp morning air rapidly replaced the warmth his meager cover had afforded him throughout the night.

Loric, packing quickly, added, “I smell smoke too. And it isn't from a cooking fire.”

Tresh looked around the encampment, taking in the hurried but nearly silent movements of soldiers breaking camp. Several scouts trotted into the woods to the north, pulling their bows from their backs and reaching for their quivers. The contingent of squires traveling with the company busily checked straps, adjusted bridles, and helped align the horses into formation.

Reaching for his own pack, Tresh hurriedly placed his blanket and kit inside then closed and tightened the straps in the practiced way of a seasoned soldier. His horse stood ready, impatiently pawing the ground. As he slung the pack over his mount's back, Tresh caught his first scent of the smoke, an acrid, heavy smoke kindled from violence.

“Let's move carefully. No noise. Keep your weapons in their scabbards. I'll tell you when to get them out,” Loric brusquely commanded as he mounted his stallion. Behind him, the column of mounted soldiers sat motionless waiting for his signal. “The scouts have the trail!”

Tresh quickly mounted his own horse, taking his position as second in command, directly behind his commander. Loric urged his horse forward slowly and rode into the woods following the path the scouts had taken moments ago, his raised hand signaling everyone to follow.

Tresh urged his horse onward, his thoughts falling back to the frantic days past. The company had crossed a small stream several days ago, west of here. There they had discovered the frenzied trampling of a large orc band. Loric had abandoned their planned patrol as he pushed the company along the orcs' trail. Since then, they had crossed their own pursuit route three times as they followed the destructive path. All told, two small farms, a hapless merchant, and two outriders from Loric's own forces had fallen prey to the vicious marauders. The mutilated and slashed corpses left in the wake of the

monsters told Loric everything. These orcs were bent on destruction and mayhem. Loric had to stop them before they could kill and terrorize again.

As the company entered the woods, Tresh spied the lead scout, Milar, running toward them. Motioning for the company to halt, Loric leaned down to receive the report from the scout. As Milar saluted, Tresh directed his horse alongside Loric's to hear the conversation.

"We found the source of the smoke, Captain. Shortly past those trees, is a meadow with a wagon road running through. It looks like they set up their ambush on a low ridge on the far side of the clearing. They must have waited until the caravan was directly below them before unleashing their arrows. Then they charged down the hill to finish the task," the scout explained.

"Did you see any movement on the far side?" asked Loric.

"Nothing was moving. But the trees are thick and densely packed on the other side. I cannot say whether those orcs are still about or not. It certainly is quiet-too quiet for my tastes. The other scouts are still watching for any movement."

"What about the clearing? What's the situation there? Any survivors?"

Milar looked down and, in that brief moment, Loric knew the answer. Milar confirmed it. "No, sir, not that we can see. But it looks as though the orcs applied their usual gruesome manner."

"Thanks, Milar," Loric said solemnly as he nodded to the scout. "Resume your watch. I will be up shortly."

The scout, with a quick salute, turned and jogged back the way he had come. Loric dismounted, turned to Tresh and motioned for him to do likewise, and signaled him to follow. The two commanders stopped after a short walk, remaining in sight of the column.

"I don't like it, Loric," Tresh began, "I don't like this one bit. This shows all signs of an ambush meant for us."

"Well, I don't much like it either but I don't think we are the targets this time. Look how close we were camped and our sentries were unaware of them. If the orcs wanted us, they would have attacked while most of us were sleeping."

"Perhaps, but this doesn't feel right. They have to know we are following them by now."

"They might and they might not. In either case, let's go take a look at the situation before we go any farther."

Tresh returned to the company, told them to hold their position, and then moved to rejoin Loric, who had already made his way toward the scouts. Reaching the wood's edge, Tresh found Loric already crouched behind a large fir tree. Taking up his own position behind a fallen log, Tresh looked out onto the grisly scene. Several small wagons were smoldering in the middle of the meadow, some with the carcasses of horses still attached to their harnesses.

"Where are the bodies?" Tresh whispered to Loric. "These orcs have never taken prisoners or trophies from their other massacres. Do you think those families got away?"

"We can hope, but sadly I don't think that is the case, Tresh." Loric's brow furrowed as he looked ahead. Turning back to Tresh, he continued, "Go back to the men and bring them from the east. Drop down through those trees over there and enter the clearing. I will wait here with the scouts. We'll cover your advance."

"Aye, Loric. But make sure that ridge is in range of our bows. We are riding in with an unprotected flank."

"Have no worry of that, my friend. You're no good to me dead," replied Loric, letting a small smile form. "And Tresh, be careful."

Tresh turned back toward the deeper woods, maintaining his crouch as he made his way back to the waiting soldiers. Loric continued watching the clearing. After several tense minutes of waiting, Loric finally saw Tresh break through the tree line with the rest of the soldiers in two lines behind him. The scouts around Loric drew their bows and sighted their arrows on the opposite ridge. The mounted formation continued down from the cover of the woods onto the trail. Watching their unimpeded progress, Loric breathed a sigh of relief as Tresh reached the first wagon: There were no battle cries, no charging orcs, no sound of arrows in flight. Loric continued observing Tresh as he began directing the men to cordon off the wagons. He noticed that the soldiers faced outward, watching for any threat.

"Milar, keep your men here and stay vigilant. I am heading down to meet them." With that quick command, Loric walked out of the woods and into the

meadow. As he neared the wagons, he could smell the smoldering wood, the burnt wool the traders had been carrying, and another smell that he knew all too well-the scent of burnt flesh. His fears were confirmed as he approached the darkened lumps he had spotted from the edge of the woods. All told, he counted twelve lives lost, twelve more transgressions that demanded justice.

Navigating his horse through the debris of smashed chests, scorched bags of wool and flax, and smoldering wagons, Tresh looked for any sign of survivors. As he passed the fourth overturned wagon, Tresh heard a thumping sound coming from inside it. Sliding off his horse and quietly drawing his sword, Tresh approached the wagon. Loric noticed his friend's actions and moved to join him.

The upended wagon had provided a small crawl space at the back, just big enough for someone to squeeze into. As Tresh approached the opening, he heard the thumping again. Kneeling down, he peered into the darkness and caught a glimpse of something inside, something moving. At the same time, a small cry broke out from the wagon.

"No! Leave me alone, please... don't hurt me."

"Tresh, what have you got there?" inquired Loric.

"I'm not sure yet, but I think it is one frightened little boy. Let me see if I can get him out of there."

Laying his sword aside, Tresh worked his way into the upturned wagon and found a child. "Come on, little one. I am not going to hurt you. The orcs are gone. We are here to help you."

A small hand reached out and grasped Tresh's arm. Tresh reciprocated by clasping those fingers with his own and gently pulled the terrified child out of the wagon. Wrapping the boy in his cloak, Loric took the child from Tresh and cradled him. Loric felt the small form shiver and shake. "It's all right, little one", he whispered. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"Loric, that isn't a child you are holding."

HALP AND THE FIELD THIEF

As Halflings go, Halp Grimbo is fairly typical. He is of average build, lives in an average home, and loves his average wife. The only thing he truly excels at is farming. If it came from a seed, Halp could grow it, and grow it better than anyone else. His carrots are always firm, his ears of corn are always sweet and his potatoes are always the biggest. Because of this, his produce is constantly in demand no matter where he goes. In fact, his love for growing wonderful produce is what got him into a particularly nasty adventure, one that Halp was very lucky to survive.

It was a dreary day in Rindol Field and Halp was anxiously awaiting the rain that would allow him to finally plant his special tomato plants. They could only be planted after the first rainstorm of a new moon in order to get that extraordinary sweet taste for which they were so well-known. Halp found himself nervously fidgeting throughout the afternoon. Jensa, his wife, always the more sensible of the couple, finally suggested that he find himself something to occupy his time as his fretting was not about to bring the rain. Halp settled into his favorite chair along with an old leather-bound book called *"Heroes of the Beranid: A Study of the Folk Champions"*. Opening the book to the passage about Barret Barleygrove and his defense of Willowroot, Halp lost himself in the account of the only Halfling knight the world has known.

With the heat of the fire filling the cottage, Halp found himself dozing off more than actually reading. The gentle nodding of his head turned to a deep sleep that lasted for several hours. Halp awoke from his nap and noticed that the day had ended quite a while ago and the rain had long since come and gone.

This will never do! I must get these tomato plants in the ground tonight or I will miss the entire season, thought Halp. He quickly pulled on an overcoat to ward off the night chill, lit a small lantern, and proceeded outside. Picking up the tomato plants from his shed, Halp placed them into his wheelbarrow along with his favorite gardening trowel and with a determined grunt, lifted the wheelbarrow and pushed it down the small well-worn path towards the garden.

As he passed his patch, he suddenly noticed there were several carrot tops strewn across the path. Lowering the wheelbarrow and raising his lantern, Halp discovered newly churned soil that was now completely devoid of any carrots. As he swung the light to the other side of the path, Halp saw tracks marking a trail decorated with half eaten beets. Kneeling down into the soft,

moist soil, he brought the lantern closer to the tracks. These were clearly not gopher marks. Halp had had his share of those in the past and knew the pattern well. They were also not rabbit, nor digger, nor any other rodent he knew. These tracks were much larger and were missing the telltale paw marks. As he considered the tracks, Halp then saw that they continued on into the cabbage.

Halp crawled along following the imprints. Horrified, he discovered that all his cabbage, his precious cabbage reserved for his special cabbage soup, was gone. Not a shred of it remained. How could this be? What could eat an entire patch of cabbage in only a few hours? Poking his finger into one of the inch-deep prints left by the invader, Halp surmised he was dealing with a creature much larger than any rodent he had ever seen. In fact, it appeared to be heavier than most young Halflings he knew. Bigger, heavier, no matter what it was, he decided that this would be the last day it fed itself on the labors of Halp Grimbo.

Halp stood up, holding the lantern in one hand while gripping his trusty gardening trowel in the other, and followed the tracks of the intruder. Reaching the edge of his tilled field, he peered ahead at the tracks that continued into the small thicket surrounding his farm. Pushing aside the branches, Halp made his way through the underbrush. Casting the light of the lantern about, he soon spotted the path of his quarry. The tracks led into a rather large opening that had been dug out beneath a rock.

“Aha!” Halp exclaimed aloud. “I have found your hiding place! I want my vegetables!”

Now Halp was not one to be brave in most situations. However, threatening his garden ranked right up with harming his loved ones. Steeling himself and gripping his trowel tighter, Halp knelt and directed the light of the lantern towards the hole. Loose dirt surrounded the hole, much of it dry despite the recent rain. A single cabbage leaf poked out of the excavation debris next to the entrance of the hole. This hole was no shallow indentation under the rock. It appeared to be more like a tunnel, but a tunnel to where?

Halp's light only illuminated the first foot or so into the tunnel. He decided to get closer to better investigate the opening and to set his lantern inside. Lying down on his stomach, Halp reached into the hole with his gardening trowel and, with much trepidation, began to poke and prod further into the tunnel. Meeting no resistance with his trowel, Halp wriggled nearer on his stomach extending his arm into the hole. Every new prod with the trowel met empty air confirming Halp's suspicions that this was no small alcove under a

rock. He pulled his arm back outside of the hole, let go of his trowel, and grabbed the lantern, pushing it inside.

With his arm still halfway inside the tunnel, he heard a noise. It was not a sound he could place. It didn't belong to any creature he had heard before. From that moment on, however, the noise became one that Halp would never forget.

Although Halp was not sure whether to call it a clattering or a chittering, the sound did make him realize just what a precarious position he was in. Lying on his stomach -- one arm halfway in a hole; his only means of defense, the gardening trowel, lying out of reach -- was definitely not a position he preferred to be in after hearing a noise that had no business coming from a dark hole in the middle of a field on a dreary night.

Halp thought it wise to let go of the lantern and remove his arm from the hole just in case. As his arm cleared the entrance, he heard the noise again. This time, it was even louder and was moving towards him. More than that, whatever was making it was moving quite quickly. Halp was able to get to his knees just as he heard the clang of his crashing lantern from inside the hole. Under the uneven light from the lantern, now lying on its side, Halp could see eerie shadows within the hole. Then suddenly, all he could see was a dark blot filling the entrance and blocking most of the light.

The dark shape moved rapidly, its body shining slightly as it stopped right in front of Halp. Scrambling for his trowel while trying to quickly crawl away from the hole, Halp got his first real view of his adversary. Two antennas protruded from the top of a bulbous head. At the base of the head were two very large mandibles clicking and clattering against each other and extending behind were two body sections supported by six rather sturdy looking legs. The creature, clearly an ant, albeit an uncommonly large one, stood motionless except for the swaying of its antennas as they searched the air.

Halp was likewise nearly frozen in place. He had managed to grab his trowel but, at this moment, was unsure what protection that would afford him. While Halp had found his intruder, he was quickly coming to the conclusion that his hunt had been a bad idea. Choosing retreat as his best course of action, he rose to his feet and slowly began to back away from the burrow and its inhabitant, the ant.

His heel came down on a fist-sized rock which immediately slipped out from under his foot. Halp began to fall backwards; his arms instinctively flailing about as he unsuccessfully tried to regain his balance. Halp hit the

ground hard, landing on his back and barely keeping his head from hitting the earth. Dazed, he struggled to look around.

Glancing towards his feet, he saw the shiny body of the ant propelling itself towards him, mandibles clacking. Halp felt his pant leg being pinned to the ground while the front two legs of the ant perched upon Halp's prodigious stomach and its clicking pincers waved right about his nose. He felt one of the antennae brushing through his hair. The clattering of the ant's mandibles was the only sound he could hear, aside from his own pounding heart.

Halp raised his arm realizing he still held, quite firmly, the gardening trowel. Quickly, he brought the trowel up jabbing it into the ant's side. The trowel's triangular head bit into the ant. The pressure lessened on Halp's midsection as the ant reared up on its back four legs. The front two appendages waved wildly in the air as the ant's head swung back and forth searching for the source of the attack. Emboldened, Halp attacked again. This time, he aimed for the insect's head. His second swing of the trowel scored a small gash. Halp attacked again slicing through a pincher.

The ant's jaws grabbed hold of his wrist and squeezed until Halp dropped the trowel. Halp could feel blood trickling from his wrist and down his arm. Abandoning the frantic search for the trowel with his free hand, Halp instead slammed his palm into the eye of the ant. He felt the front two legs of the ant dropping onto his chest as his arm, still held by the ant, was pulled to and fro. Halp's left hand flew up again grabbing hold of one of the ant's antennae. Getting a firm grasp, Halp pulled it while throwing himself in the same direction. Halp and the ant rolled over and over and finally stopped with Halp's head now directly under the open jaws of the ant.

The ant's mandibles opened wide and inched closer to his face. Halp knew this was the end. He would no longer tend his garden nor enjoy the feel of a nice fire while sitting in his favorite chair. Most of all, he would miss his wife, Jensa, who was always there for him, who always was tidying up after him, and was always putting his favorite pruning knife back into the coat of his overcoat so he would have it. Could it be? he thought.

Reaching into his overcoat, he felt the familiar handle of his knife. Gripping the knife in his hand and pulling it out of his pocket as fast as he could, Halp stuck it directly into one of the eyes of the ant. The result was immediate. The ant thrashed about, abandoning its attempts to attack. He scrambled away from the ant, releasing his hold on it, and searched for his trowel.

Seeing a dull glint to his right, he reached out and felt the handle of his gardening tool. Raising the implement, Halp struck the ant several times with the triangular point. Noticing the ant was no longer thrashing about, he halted his assault, wiped his brow, and slumped forward to catch his breath. Pushing himself to his feet, he surveyed the immediate area. The air was silent. He could see no other ants.

Halp struggled back through the underbrush and walked through his emptied cabbage patch to the path. He quickly removed the tomato plants from the wheelbarrow, gently setting them aside until he could get them planted. He then pushed the wheelbarrow back through the patch and into the thicket. A few steps later, he bent over and picked up the body of the ant, lugging it into the bed of the wheelbarrow. With a grunt, Halp began to navigate back through the thicket and the field and back up the path towards his shed.

Reaching the shed, Halp slumped down with his back resting against the door. He began to shake all over from the shock. Bleeding, exhausted, he closed his eyes and, after a time, the shivering stopped as he fell asleep.

Halp awoke as early morning sunlight reached his face. Rubbing his eyes, he looked to his wheelbarrow and its contents, assuring himself that the night's battle was not a dream. There in front of him was the dead ant with its severely damaged eye, the gash across the side of its head and the various trowel wounds along the length of its body.

Rising from the ground, Halp stretched and thought about what to do next. He knew where he was going! Down his path and onto the main road through Rindol Field, Halp pushed the wheelbarrow, heading to the town hall. As he passed by his neighbors' cottages, he noticed the occasional curtain being pulled aside. Some of the younger Halflings, already out at play in the early morning, followed Halp along the road. He passed Dustin and Perby Pipeleaf and a few fellow farmers. They too glanced his way, murmuring among themselves as they noticed his cargo.

As Halp reached the doors of the town hall, he let go of the wheelbarrow, turned towards those following him, waved good morning to them, and then stood patiently amidst the growing commotion. Mayor Dorbin ventured outside to see what was causing such a fuss. After seeing the grisly remains of the ant in the wheelbarrow, Mayor Dorbin asked Halp what had happened.

And that is when Halp began his tale. He told of how he found his garden destroyed. He went on to share the discovery of the tracks leading to the burrow, and his battle with the ant. Not many in Rindol Field that day went with-

out hearing the story as Halp stood at the Town Hall and told it as long as he had listeners. The folk were abuzz with the size of the ant. They also congratulated Halp for his bravery and some even compared him to Barret Barleygrove.

Towards the late afternoon, and the sixth or so retelling of his story, a small voice chimed in from the back of the crowd.

"If there's one ant, shouldn't there be others?" commented little Perry Tasslethimble. "I have seen lots of small ants and well... ants never travel alone."

The conversations from the crowd suddenly ended. In the ensuing quiet, from somewhere, perhaps even from a distant field, a chitter chattering could be heard.



HARBINGERS

PART ONE

Essin was tired, but then again at his age every day was tiring. As he trudged through the forest back to his isolated cabin, he was looking forward to a bite to eat, then relaxing with a mug of ale and a good pipe to end his day. For as surely as the sun would rise, he knew it was going to be a busy day tomorrow.

He'd already had an eventful time checking his traps in the forest this day. He counted himself lucky to fill one trap on an average day, and many days he had nothing to show for his treks. Today all of his traps had been full.

He wondered about his sudden good fortune, but Essin was never much for religion or superstition. To his way of thinking, things would happen, or they wouldn't, and the best a body could do was to try to stack the odds beforehand.

His catch sack was very heavy, slowing his progress home. Darkness was beginning to fall as he neared the clearing where his cabin lie, but this didn't trouble Essin much. He knew this forest well, having made his home here these many years since his Tressie died.

Still lost in thought about dinner and a pipe, Essin didn't notice the figure standing at the door of his cabin until he was almost on top of it.

It appeared to be a tall, thin human, wearing a gray hooded cloak.

"Here now, what you be doing on me stoop?" asked Essin.

There was no reply from the figure, but it did appear to notice Essin, turning slightly to face the old man.

"What is it you be wanting, stranger? Lost are ye?" chattered Essin. "Lucky for you the Vulmani didn't vent your weazand."

The stranger stood mute.

"Well, if it's food you're in need of, it's your lucky day," Essin said as he shook his catch bag. "More critters here than I could eat afore they went off anyway."

The stranger continued his silent regard of Essin.

The old man was growing nervous. The Vulmani who claimed this land made it difficult for many to venture deep into this region. As far as Essin knew, he was the only outsider with permission to live or travel in Vulmani lands. Therefore, a visitor that didn't have fangs and fur was something of an oddity.

As he paid closer attention to the stranger, Essin noticed a few more things. The figure, other than shifting its stance a bit when it first regarded Essin, was absolutely still. Moreover, there was an unpleasant smell, which Essin couldn't quite place.

"I'll be stepping inside now, stranger," stammered Essin as he started past the figure. "If you be wanting something, now's the time to let a man know. Otherwise, I'll be saying good day to you."

The figure made no response, but slowly turned to regard Essin's progress to the cabin door.

"As it suits you," shrugged Essin as he stepped inside his cabin, closing the door behind him and securing the latch.

Dropping his burden, the old man hastily uttered an incantation, igniting the wood stacked in the fireplace and the candles placed around the single room.

Relieved to be inside and away from the stranger, Essin busied himself with preparing his evening meal. He had barely gotten the water over the fire when he heard a slow, steady rapping on his door.

"Burn ye stranger, I'm cooking dinner here!" shouted Essin. "If you wanted something, you should have told me afore I got started!"

The knocking continued. Snatching up his axe, he rushed to the door to confront the annoying stranger. He lifted the latch and flung the door open, weapon held in a threatening manner.

As the light spilled out of the cabin and into the clearing, his exasperation turned to terror. Hundreds of figures had filled the clearing, all regarding the cabin in perfect stillness. Standing in the doorway was the stranger. Death had not been kind to it.

PART TWO

The scout looked down upon the valley. He had traveled through this region many times in his years as a hunter and was familiar with every bush, tree, and rock. Today it felt somehow wrong. He attributed part of it to the weather, which was unusually gray and overcast for a summer day, but still, something was...wrong.

While the valley was filled with the sound of insects, it was missing the songs of birds, and the telltale rustle of other wildlife. This was a fertile valley, a home to many creatures, with a freshwater stream flowing through it. It was a blessing so close to the brackish waters found in the flooded lands to the south.

The scout decided to investigate further. It was his duty; these lands were claimed by his people, the Vulmani. If anything was amiss, he needed to discover what, and there was no profit in delay.

The scout flowed down the hillside like a shadow, and was soon down to the valley floor. Running through the center of the valley was a well-used animal trail.

Inspection of the trail revealed something interesting. While there were a great many fresh animal tracks, there were fresh tracks of another sort. These were of several types, most of which the scout did not recognize. Some resembled shod human tracks, others were birdlike scratches in the soft earth, and some were simply impressions in the dirt, as if something was leaning heavily on a staff. All the tracks, animal and unknown, were headed northwest, with the unknown tracks being the most recent. This gave the impression that the wildlife was being driven in front of the unknown.

The scout was torn. He wanted to follow the tracks and catch sight of whatever had made them, but he was also of a mind to follow them back to their origin. Discretion and duty won out over simple curiosity.

He estimated he was only a few hours behind whatever had made the tracks. Setting a rapid, but cautious pace, staying well under cover, he headed northwest.

Spoor was still abundant. Hunks of fur were stuck to limbs and brambles, as if the animals they belonged to had abandoned caution. In addition, the scout would occasionally find bits of cloth, worn and weathered, but freshly deposited on the underbrush.

The scout pressed on as the sun fell lower in the sky, nearing a widening in the valley well after dusk. Ahead would be a cabin inhabited by a peculiar old human named Essin Lark. Having made peace with the Vulmani chieftain years ago, Essin was not troubled by the tribe. The scout had shared Essin's fire on several occasions, getting to know the old man fairly well.

As the clearing came into view, the scout spotted the cabin. No lights were visible in the cabin, and nothing was moving. Only the sounds of insects and wind through the trees could be heard.

With great caution and skill borne from years of raiding, the scout crept up on the cabin and made his way to the front door. The door was standing open, the interior cloaked in darkness.

Hand firmly clasped on the hilt of his long knife, the scout edged his way inside the cabin. The coppery smell of spilled blood and the musty scent of animals were heavy here. It was still too dark for him to see anything inside the single room.

Retrieving a candle from his pouch, the scout quietly uttered the words of a simple cantrip causing the candle to come to sputtering life. The glow from the candle spread through the room revealing its contents.

Judging by the disarray, there had been a struggle in the cabin. The simple furnishings were strewn about and broken; a kettle full of water had fallen in the fireplace, dousing it. The scout saw a full catch sack on the floor, explaining the smell of animals and blood. Of Essin, there was no sign.

After restoring and relighting a fallen lantern, he continued his examination of the cabin. As he moved to the far side of the room, a faint scratching sound could be heard coming from underneath a toppled chair.

Lifting the chair, he was amazed to find a skeletal leg, roughly severed below the knee, laying flat on the floor, shod with a moldering black shoe. The leg was *moving*, twitching on the dirt floor in a random, jerky manner.

The scout jumped back a few paces, his hand gripping the hilt of his knife. Chiding himself for his fear, he moved back to examine the leg more closely.

The scout had seen many bones in the past, but never animated ones. Poking at it with his knife caused it to become even more agitated. He could not see how the bones were held together, but it was clearly moving as if it were all of one piece.

Not knowing what else to do, the scout decided to take this strange object back to the tribe. Perhaps the elders could make more sense of it.

Casting around for something to store the leg in, his eyes fell upon the catch sack. He shook the dead animals out, and was in the process of figuring how best to get the leg in the sack, when he heard movement outside.

The scout flattened himself against the wall by the open doorway, knife at the ready. The sound of movement drew closer, to just outside the door, then stopped. The scout was tense, teeth bared in a quiet snarl, unnerved by the day's events.

Several long moments passed, the scout becoming more and more apprehensive. He was ready to leap through the doorway and confront the source of the noises when they unexpectedly resumed.

A figure appeared in the doorway and shuffled towards the center of the room. It was Essin, leaning heavily on a stick. The scout relaxed. Essin was no threat and could possibly explain what had transpired.

"Essin, Vargorht greets you!" the scout called out to the old man.

Essin turned to face the scout. No longer in profile, the reason for the stick was quickly apparent; Essin was missing his left leg from just below the knee. Essin stared at the scout for a moment, expression blank. The scout regarded him in return.

Along with the missing leg, Essin's breeches below the knee were cut and ragged, but there was no sign of bleeding. As the scout moved his eyes upward, he noticed something even more troubling. Essin's unblinking eyes were not the faded blue he remembered, but instead they were black, iris indistinguishable from pupil.

Turning away from the scout, Essin made his way towards the still-twitching leg. As he stooped down and picked it up, the twitching ceased. Essin dropped his stick and placed the skeletal part against the severed end of his own leg.

So rapt was the scout in the actions of Essin that he did not notice another enter the cabin until it moved past him to stand near the old man.

Dressed in a gray cloak with its back to him, the scout could not tell much about the newcomer until it raised both arms above its head allowing its

sleeves to fall. Withered skin was stretched over bone, with large patches missing, exposing the skeleton beneath.

The scout had seen enough. Keeping one eye on the two figures in the center of the room and the other on the door, the scout began inching his way out of the cabin.

Paying no attention to the scout, the cloaked figure made a short, croaking incantation. The skin around Essin's ravaged leg withered to match that of the figure, and the old man made a few tentative steps. The skeletal leg now seemed a part of Essin.

Abandoning stealth, the scout bolted for the door. He made it to the doorway, and with a last glance over his shoulder at the two odd beings he ran outside.

He was immediately brought up short, running full on into another figure. This one was not hooded, but dressed in scraps of leather armor that was once quite ornate. Beneath the armor was blackened skin and exposed bone. The face was a rotted visage of something long dead. Its legs were odd, the right withered and wrapped in tatters, the left exposed and very fleshy below the knee. The left was shod in... *Essin's boot!*

It reached out a bony arm, grasped the scout by the tunic, and attempted to pull the scout close. Reacting without thought, the scout slashed at the offending arm, his heavy blade cleaving the appendage off at the elbow.

Freed, the scout dodged past the corpse, getting a clear view of the valley. It was filled with figures standing silently, regarding the cabin and the scout. More were filing out of the trees to the west. Heart filled with fear, the scout exploded into a run seeking safety in the forest to the east.

With no thoughts of stealth, the scout ran harder than he thought possible. Realizing he could not keep up this speed for long, he settled into the ground-eating lope of his people. He could maintain this gait for a night, a day, and a night again if he needed to.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw no signs of pursuit. The scout kept his pace, unwilling to take appearances for granted. He changed course slightly, making for his village. At this rate, he expected to be there just before the following dusk.

The scout felt a pain in his chest. Looking down, he was alarmed to see that the hand and forearm of the corpse that had grabbed him was still there with fingers entwined around the rawhide laces of his tunic.

Snatching the limb, he tore it free of his tunic. Unlike the leg in Essin's cabin, the arm was no longer animated. Ready to fling it away, he noticed an oddly fashioned chain bracelet of mithril and emerald attached to the wrist. This at least would be some evidence; he was unwilling to risk taking the limb to his village. He suspected its owner, *or perhaps an armless Essin*, would come seeking it.

After seeing Essin, the scout had no doubts about the good intentions of these newcomers. Removing the bracelet, he flung the arm into the forest behind him.

On he ran, long miles yet to cover. Invaders had entered the Vulmani lands and he must bring this news to his people, or die trying.

PART THREE

"Hold 'em lads, hold 'em!" a shout from within the town exhorted.

"Hold 'em, he says, like we're bloody going to ask them to dance with us," muttered the young dwarf.

The young dwarf had been on the wall for days with no sight of the enemy. Along with the rest of the hundred-odd defenders, he was anxious for something, anything, to happen.

Word of an invasion had come from the Vulmani, who were fleeing their former lands en masse, and then confirmed by several human trappers. The frontier town of Southwatch, nestled at the base of the Beranid Hills, was directly in the path of the invading force as it moved steadily north.

It looked like the dwarf would be granted his wish soon. The enemy had finally made an appearance

Blight me if there aren't a cursed lot of them, thought the young dwarf.

Shambling, crawling, limping, or striding, scores of corpses had flowed out of the forest below Southwatch before arraying themselves in a semblance of a battle line. Attired in remnants of clothing and armor, and equipped with a variety of weapons, they looked quite motley.

Some of the defenders began to jest about the invaders, making sport of their appearance.

“Oi, Valum, is that your wife out there?” shouted one boisterous human.

“Willi, that's not my wife, looks more like your mother, but I thought she was working the docks this week,” Valum shouted in reply.

The entire line laughed at Valum and Willi. The dire nature of the invaders was forgotten for a moment. The young dwarf even managed a grin despite his anxiety.

The moment of levity passed as the invaders began their slow advance towards Southwatch.

“Horsemen...ready up!” came a shout from the human captain on the wall. As the ranking military officer in Southwatch, he was in charge of the hasty defense that had been set up over the last few days.

“Horsemen ready!” came the reply from the leader of twenty heavy horse below. The heavy horsemen were all confident veterans, having honed their skills guarding caravans from frequent Vulmani raiding parties.

“Archers...ready up!”

“Archers ready!” was the reply from the walls and the sergeant placed in charge of thirty human archers and ten dwarven crossbowmen.

The captain had decided to meet the enemy in the open ground below Southwatch. Here he could best employ the horsemen and give the archers on the walls more time to thin out the enemy ranks.

“Archers....loose!” commanded the captain.

Thirty arrows arced towards the enemy, most finding home in the bodies of the invaders. One corpse stumbled as an arrow penetrated its leg, but none fell.

The young dwarf watched as flight after flight of feathered shafts flew into the invaders with no real effect. Perhaps the heavier bolts of his kinsmen would be more telling once the enemy drew within range.

“Horsemen.....charge!”

Shouting fierce battle cries, the twenty mounted warriors covered the ground between Southwatch and the invaders in moments, meeting with a crash. Dozens of the animated corpses were flung away by the impact. The horsemen hacked at the invaders with a vengeance, sword arms fueled by rage and disgust.

Dozens more of the undead fell under this onslaught, as the horsemen drove deeper into the enemy line. Intent on their furious drive, the horsemen paid little heed to what was occurring behind them. All but a handful of the fallen corpses were rising to their feet, and the entire mass of undead was contracting inward towards the horsemen.

As the advance of the cavalry began to slow, the horsemen finally saw the danger they had placed themselves in. The dead crowded around the living as they made a desperate attempt to carve a path to freedom. The attempt was futile; as quickly as one corpse fell, another pushed forward to take its place.

The defenders watched in horror as one by one the horsemen were pulled screaming from their mounts, disappearing into the mass of invaders.

Once the horsemen were dealt with, the undead resumed their advance on Southwatch. The dwarven crossbowmen began firing as the invaders came in range. The heavy bolts from the powerful dwarven weapon would stagger their targets, but did not halt the advance.

So much for that idea, thought the young dwarf. They're already blightin' corpses; poking holes in them won't do much.

"Everyone inside!" screamed the captain.

The defenders that were arrayed outside the wooden walls scrambled through the gate. Once all were inside, the gate was closed and secured with heavy timbers.

In short order, the invaders reached the wooden palisades of Southwatch, milling around outside.

It would have been nice to have some good, solid stone around us instead of wood, thought the young dwarf. Using goblin fire on the invaders had been discussed, but the wooden construction of Southwatch made fire too dangerous.

While the young dwarf was dreaming about stone, the invaders were becoming more purposeful. A slow, steady pounding of the gate was occurring, while more and more of the undead moved to assist.

Archers and crossbowmen were still raining arrows down on the undead, but their effect was minimal. Warriors and townspeople gripped their weapons tightly, knowing what was soon to come. The gate was showing signs of weakness, as expected from such a quickly constructed barrier.

Very little time passed until the planks in the gate were down allowing the invaders access to the interior of Southwatch. They poured into the outpost to be met by sword, axe, staff, and club.

The defenders fought with a passion, with no path of escape and expecting no quarter from the invaders. Scores, then hundreds of the undead were mowed down by the defenders.

The undead did not attempt to defend themselves, intent only in killing. Some fought with weapons, but most were unarmed.

After seeing what had happened to the horsemen, the defenders were taking no chances with the fallen. Invader bodies were separated from their limbs, and in some cases, their heads.

The young dwarf fought well in this confusing melee, using his axe to great effect and growing quite adept at amputating limbs in a single stroke. After what seemed like hours, the last invader fell.

Numb and exhausted, the survivors counted the cost. Over half the defenders inside the walls were dead, and many of the living were seriously wounded.

The captain was among the dead, along with most of the other professional soldiers, dwarves and humans alike. The young dwarf, who had somehow managed to survive the battle unscathed, found himself in charge of the ragged survivors, by simple fact of attrition.

“Oh gods, no, no!” came a cry from the walls.

The young dwarf saw one of the archers pointing down towards the forest. Scrambling to the ruined gate, his heart sank at what greeted his eyes.

Another, larger contingent of undead was emerging from the forest.

PART FOUR

From atop a tall tower, King Horus Targonor Furth admired the city of Targonor. Surely, this is as great as anything the ancients wrought, he thought. Nothing on modern Thestra could compare to his city, or his kingdom.

His reverie was interrupted by the arrival of his counselor.

“Sire, Southwatch has fallen”, the counselor said without preamble or flourish.

“Grim news indeed, my friend,” replied the king. “What details have you?”

“Very little, milord, only that a small group of the defenders managed to escape, and the numbers of the invaders are beyond counting.”

“Where are these survivors now? I would speak to them myself,” said the king.

“Alas, sire, they are not available. The survivors were led to the Cleft by a young dwarf named Degin, where they are recovering from their wounds.”

“And what news of the invaders?” asked the king.

“That sire, seems a little more encouraging. They have not moved past the Beranid foothills, and it looks as if they have little desire to do so at this time. But neither have they withdrawn.”

“Interesting”, said the king. “Tell me about the Vulmani.”

“Milord, the Vulmani are encamped just west of the Brightwoods. They say they will welcome any who wish to treat with them, and that they are not a threat. The elves, of course, refuse to believe them, nor can I begrudge the elves their sentiment.”

“But with what is happening on the south frontier, I have no doubts that the Vulmani speak the truth.”

“Now would be an ideal time to rid us of their nuisance once and for all, don't you think?” said the king.

The counselor considered the king's words for a long moment before replying.

“Sire, I suppose we could readily dispatch the Vulmani, now that they are out of their forest element. However, I also think we might have need of them

in the future, and we can ill-afford any losses in battle with this new threat looming quite large.”

“What then, do you propose we do about the Vulmani? And if we don't take action, what is to prevent a force from Leth Nurae seeking to settle old scores?” asked the king.

“Of the Vulmani, and the Elves, I have a notion. To the Vulmani we will cede some lands in the Northern Plains, mostly useless to us, in return for their fealty. Once they have sworn fealty, the Elves dare not attack them, since to do so would be committing an act of war upon your kingdom, and Elves are not so foolish as that.”

“Do you think we can keep them in line?” asked the king. “Raiding, stealing, all of that would have to stop.”

“I think we can manage them, milord. Many of their most savage warriors fell before the invaders; those that remain are no more dangerous than the men of Falgarholm are. Which is to say, they will be a problem, but a manageable one, and worth the cost.”

“Even the most skilled hunters of the Elves acknowledge the Vulmani as their superior in terms of woodcraft and stealth.” continued the counselor. “These traits will have much value in the times to come, I am sure of it.”

“Your plan seems sound, old friend. I will heed your advice on this matter,” said the king after some thought.

“Thank you sire, I truly believe you will not regret this course of action.” said the counselor.

“But what of the invaders?” asked the king.

“We wait and see, my liege.” replied the counselor. “We wait, and we see.”

MORGAN'S TALE

THE LETTER

Respected Sir,

I, with regret, must inform you that your presence is required in New Targonor. Your hard-earned leisure time is much deserved, extenuating circumstances do, however, dictate that your leave be cut short. Please return with the utmost expediency. Remember, your service to the people of New Targonor is an invaluable one.

Minister Adlus

Morgan Derek folded the letter and set it on the table in front of him. Frowning, he crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Typical," he thought, "Just typical."

"Were the instructions clear?"

Morgan looked up. The rider who had delivered the message was standing next to him, peering down quizzically.

"He didn't even write this himself, you know." Morgan answered, "He probably has a room full of them." Morgan leaned forward and snatched the letter from the table, glowering. "Once a year, I get a few days to come home and rest and without fail - one of these, every time." He shook the letter in his hand half-heartedly and sighed with resignation.

He sat in his favorite tavern, in the village of Tursh. It was spring in Thes-tra, the winter snows had melted and the pleasant feel of a new summer had begun to gently settle over the small farming community. The tavern was bustling with activity as farmhands, weary from long days in the fields, arrived to eat, drink and share a laugh. The smells of an oaken fire filled the room, its snapping and popping just barely audible over the jovial voices of the patrons. For Morgan, this was a rare luxury.

As a young ranger pledged into the service of the great city of New Targonor, Morgan's assignments kept him from home much of the time. He liked traveling the lands though, it was one of the reasons he had sworn his service six years ago. But since then, Minister Adlus had assigned a steady stream of road patrol duties and scant else. It was a bland job and Morgan

cared little for it. Long periods of little to no human contact gave him time to wander in his thoughts though, and for that he was thankful.

Yet somehow, every year when Morgan was granted a small amount of leave, a crisis had managed to arise on the small stretch of road he guarded. And every year, Morgan was pulled from his home by Minister Adlus and sent to deal with whatever minor disturbance was threatening the freedom of Thestra that particular day.

He should have learned to expect it by now, but Morgan had remained purposefully optimistic that this year he would be able to enjoy his leave and spend some much needed time getting re-acquainted with his boyhood home. But once again, it seemed as if he would have to wait another year. Duty had called, and he would answer.

"The instructions," the rider repeated, "Do you understand them?"

Morgan stared at the man standing before him; he was certainly unlike any rider Adlus had sent before. The man looked more like a hardened soldier than a message courier. He wore a simple, yet elegant suit of green tinted ring mail that fit snugly across his broad shoulders. Across his back was strapped a large, powerful looking sword. The blade was covered, but Morgan was sure that it was no toy. The man shifted his weight, gazing back at Morgan coolly, waiting for an answer.

"Yes," he replied, "they're quite clear." Morgan pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. He reached into a dingy pouch secured to his belt and emerged with a few small coins. "Thank you," he said and offered them to the messenger.

The man grinned for the first time, amused. He bowed his head slightly, turned and exited the tavern.

"Ah, in it for the love of the job," Morgan said to himself, "...that'll change." He looked down at the unfinished meal on his table, it seemed somehow appropriate.

"I knew what that man was here for the second he walked in." a friendly voice said, coming up behind him. Morgan returned the coins to his pouch and turned, smiling.

"Oh did you now, Gillian?" he said.

"Sure did!" the young barmaid chirped with a grin, "I'll just put the rest of this away for next year. That way you can pick up right where you left off. Maybe you'll even get to finish!" Morgan grinned as Gillian began to remove the remnants of his dinner from the table. "We don't get too many like him in here," she paused, "you're not in trouble are you?"

"Too many like who?" Morgan asked.

"Your friend in green! You are in trouble, aren't you! What did you do this time Morgan Derek?" Gillian demanded.

Morgan laughed, "You're awful quick to the stern tone! I didn't do anything. There's nothing for me *to* do. A mouse probably got ran over by a wagon on my road and Adlus wants me to go pick it up. You know, the usual," he made a face; "...you're right though, something about that rider made me a little uneasy. He was...," Morgan searched for the word.

"...Green!" offered Gillian.

Morgan rolled his eyes, "I was thinking more like... intense."

"That too," she agreed with a nod.

Morgan sighed inwardly. "Well, it'll be dark soon," the young ranger said, peering out the front of the tavern, "If I leave now I can make it to New Targonor by morning." He did not want to leave.

"Well you're not going anywhere until I get a hug," Gillian said reaching out, "last time you just took off without a word to anyone."

He chuckled, "Very well then." Gillian wasted no time in wrapping him up in her arms, and gave Morgan a tight squeeze.

"Now you listen here mister," she said, stepping back, "When you find that big bad mouse squashed in the middle of the road, I want you to be careful. It probably had friends, lots of them, and they're probably quite angry about the whole thing. So... just be careful, all right?"

Morgan nodded and picked up his traveling pack behind the chair. "Don't worry; I'm sure it's nothing big. Besides," he added with a grin, slinging the pack over his shoulder, "it would take at least thirty mice to do me in. And I can run much faster than they can."

"At least thirty, and much faster," Gillian echoed.

Morgan smiled and turned towards the door. "I'll try to get back as quickly as I can," he said and with a small wave the young ranger stepped out of the tavern into the night.

The sun was already setting as Morgan stepped into the street. Its pale orange glow slowly sank below the horizon and the pleasant breeze of the day steadily turned frigid as night descended upon northern Thestra. Morgan pushed his sandy hair from his eyes and wrapped his heavy woodsman's cloak tightly around his body. *Not summer yet*, he thought to himself.

The streets were quiet. Only a few people still milled about. Vendors, mostly, still cleaning up after a tiring day of selling their wares. Morgan kicked at a loose rock in the muddy dirt road that led through the center of the village. He was not looking forward to walking through the night; at least he'd be able to get a horse from the stables once he got to New Targonor. *Still*, he thought, *that doesn't help me much tonight*.

Morgan lingered in the center of the village briefly - savoring what he knew he'd not see again for some time. After a few moments he muttered to himself and began to walk, determined to put as much distance as he could between himself and Tursh, the quicker the better.

NEW TARGONOR

The buildings of Tursh soon faded from view in the darkening sky, as Morgan walked briskly out the east end of the small village until soon its flickering torches were barely distinguishable from the twinkling stars above. For a ways, he followed the oft traveled winding road, listening to his heavy boots thumping on the earth beneath him. The steady cadence calmed him, on this clear, cold night.

As he trudged through the darkness he wondered what the real reason behind his summons was. Minister Adlus's notes were always so brief and cryptic. Morgan understood the necessity of keeping some things quiet, but he half thought Adlus did it on purpose - just to keep him unsettled. Truth be known, he was not overly fond of the Minister. He seemed more concerned with writing reports and filing papers than actually solving problems. That is unless Morgan had taken leave, in which case there were always an abundance of problems to be solved - and nobody else to do it.

Morgan wondered if Adlus knew of his resentment, but doubted it. They rarely spoke and when they did it was often too cluttered with formality to have any real meaning. Such is the way of cities, Morgan thought.

The path suddenly veered to the right, Morgan stopped. He'd gone as far as the road would take him. Having traveled between the village and New Targonor many times he had learned early that he could save many hours by crossing the Weatherfall River himself, rather than following the road south until he reached the trade bridge.

Stepping off the path into the tall grass of the plains, he drew a short sword from his side and waded into the knee-high brush -- poking here and there to avoid any hidden burrows or gnarled stumps that could play a potential hazard to him. There was a time when small farms occupied much of these lands, but now none remained. They had all been razed or abandoned during the centuries before and for a good many reasons, had never been fully rebuilt. As a result, the region had largely been left to its own, and after many years of relative peace was entirely grown over.

Morgan liked it though, much better than any city in fact. In his far removed, solitary outpost he had learned the value of silence. Travelers were infrequent and days would go by where he spoke not a word - and spoke it only to himself when he finally did. There was a peacefulness to it, and while it was at times a lonely one, it comforted him a great deal.

This was a comfort no city could provide, least of all the teeming New Targonor. Never was there a time when someone was not out roaming the streets. There was always someone, something moving and that far off voice echoing through the alleys. It could never attain that perfect stillness only the plains seemed capable of. Still, the city did have a unique charm of its own. In these dangerous times there were very few places Morgan felt completely safe - secure from any outside aggression. New Targonor's walls seemed to block out everything beyond the gates. While inside of the city, the rest of the world ceased to exist. It was a place where all civilized citizens of Thestra are free to come in search of protection and so long as they abide by the laws of the great settlement, protection was granted.

For several hours, Morgan walked in quiet contemplation - occasionally rustling up a small group of rabbits or a skulking musk hog with the tip of his sword. The tall sweeping grass gradually thinned and was replaced by shorter, bristly underbrush as he drew nearer to the river.

Morgan could hear the gentle streaming of the water before he was close enough to see the river in the moon's pale glow. Merely a faint shadow at first, but as he approached the source it began to slowly materialize in front of him. The Weatherfall River wistfully wandered through the plains, peacefully twisting about as it split the landscape. The night darkened the shallow water, giving the illusion of depth. Morgan knew better though -- the water was shallow, and quite safe. He'd crossed here many times before.

He waited a moment as his eyes adjusted to the reflecting moonlight. Morgan began to scan the bank, searching for something until he had found the familiar sight he was looking for; a fallen tree lay partially submerged in the river. Its branches had long since been ripped from the trunk but its roots still clung tightly to the shore, creating a natural bridge that led slightly past half the width of the water.

Morgan sheathed his sword, removed his boots and hiked up the legs of his pants. He then carefully crept onto the tree. Once he had gained his balance Morgan began to slowly make his way across. He stopped just before the trunk dipped into the water and peered across the river -- he could just make out the silhouette of the opposing shore. He set himself, took a quick step back then threw his boots the rest of the way across. Morgan heard two dull thuds as they landed in the grass on the opposite bank. Next, Morgan removed his traveling pack and holding it high above his head he began to wade into the river.

The wet cold engulfing his foot sent a chill running up through Morgan's body as he took his first step. He took a second step and carefully set his foot down as to avoid any sharp rocks hidden beneath the surface. The water came up to just above the young ranger's knees, though the summer rains would soon change that. Morgan quickly waded across the rest of the river and climbed up onto the embankment. He rolled his pant legs down, located his boots and sat in the grass to put them back on.

He looked up at the sky - sunrise was still a few hours away, he was making good time though and would be at the city gates shortly. He finished strapping on his boots and stood up. Morgan swatted at a small insect buzzing around his head and began to walk again.

He continued to plow through the night for a time, quietly humming to himself as he went along. Soon, thin streaks of light began to sneak over the horizon, streaming from the dull orange glow which lingered just out of sight. Morgan squinted; he could just barely see the shadow of New Targonor's

great walls. He picked up his pace, anxious to reach the gates and hurried towards the city.

As the sun began to rise over the far horizon, filling the landscape with a dim morning light the massive walls of the city became clearly visible. Inside of them, mountainous towers leapt into the air spiraling upwards towards the sky. Morgan paused a moment to take in the sight before him. Regardless of how many times he came to New Targonor or how much he preferred the open wilderness the sight of the colossal fortress city never ceased to astound him. New Targonor was set, like a mountain on the northernmost coast of Thestra. With its back to the sea, it was a pillar of strength and might to all of those whom inhabited it and was the backbone of the human kingdom. No force had ever breached the strong stone walls.

The closer Morgan got to the city the more immense it became, what started as a shadowy block in the distance now dominated the landscape. The cool ocean air blew pleasantly around the walls, rustling the thick grass with each pass. Morgan could begin to hear the sounds from inside the high stone walls as New Targonor awoke for the day. He made his way to the east gates, where a steady stream of workers and their carts were already coming in and out of the city. Large billowing banners flew proudly in the wind above the entrance as dozens of armored guards patrolled the ground below.

Morgan passed through the crowd, stepping up to the gates.

"You there!" a chain mail clad guard barked to him, "What is your business here?"

Morgan smiled and flashed the guard the note he'd been sent, Adlus's seal plainly visible on the edge. "I was wondering much the same myself," he said. The guard nodded and waved him in.

He passed through the gate and into New Targonor's parade grounds. Large tents were erected on both sides of the busy street. They were filled with all manners of knights and tournament combatants, preparing themselves for the day. To Morgan's right two men rode horses through the jousting fields, practicing their timing. Several children lounged about in the wooden grandstands watching the two riders below. The stone cobbled street continued on to the left past the city's stables and down a slight hill until it reached another gate that guarded the entrance to the inner city. And looming over it all was the central keep, its numerous high towers keeping a watchful eye on all below. This was New Targonor, pride of the human kingdom.

Morgan followed the endless flow of people along the street as they streamed under the raised portcullis and into the heart of the city. As Morgan stepped through the gate the world around him changed once more. Large buildings were packed tightly together for as far as he could see. Busy streets, teeming with activity, ran through the center of them, darting this way and that. Vendors were already in their stalls, hawking their wares. Workmen hung from the sides of buildings endlessly pounded away from their scaffolds - forever expanding upon the already massive city.

Morgan exhaled and pressed into the crowd. The streets, even in this early hour, were already tightly packed with people eager to get a head start on the day. A loud metal clanking rang from a building to his side as a blacksmith began his day of work. He looked up at the keep towering over the rest of the city. Somewhere inside of it Adlus would be waiting in his office to see him. Morgan quickly weaved through the throng of people in the streets, dodging carts and the animals that pulled them.

It didn't take him long to reach the inner gate that led to the keep. It was nearly the same size as the outer gate and looked to be at least as thick. The crowds had thinned considerably in this part of the city but there were still a goodly amount of guards posted at the entrance to the courtyard. They stood in pairs, and talked idly with one another pausing only to wave the occasional government official along. Morgan showed the guards his letter and passed through the gate.

He walked briskly through the courtyard and up the ramp leading to the giant stone fortress; Morgan had been here before many times and knew where he was going. He passed another guard at the main door of the compound and once inside quickly made his way up a flight of stairs and down several corridors until he had reached the Ministers' district.

The hallway opened into a large room with numerous adjoining offices. A chandelier dangled from the ceiling, hovering several feet over the large rug covering the floor. Padded benches lined the walls and deep, cozy looking arm chairs sat sporadically around the room. At the far end of the chamber a clerk sat behind a desk busily shuffling a stack of papers. Upon hearing the ranger, she looked up; Morgan nodded in acknowledgement and walked across the room to Adlus's office.

As he raised his hand to knock on the wooden door the clerk spoke up, "The Minister has yet to arrive for the day," she said with a smile, "You may have a seat and wait for him if you'd like."

"Thanks," he replied, "Do you happen to know when he'll be in?"

She wrinkled her brow and shrugged, "Hard to say, within a few hours I would imagine. Sometimes the Minister is later though."

Morgan grumbled quietly to himself, so much for that pressing emergency. He thanked the clerk and walked back to the center of the room. He removed his pack and set it on the floor next to him. Letting out an exhaustive sigh, he sank into one of the large armchairs. The muscles in his leg ached from a night of walking and no sleep, and the weight of the pack had stiffened his back. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the cushioned headrest; it felt wonderful to sit down. There were certainly no chairs like this back at his outpost, or in Tursh for that matter.

ADLUS

"Wake up," came a deep voice from above him. Morgan felt a pair of large hands plant themselves on his shoulders. Suddenly, his entire body began to shake. "Wake up!" the voice repeated - more insistent this time.

Morgan's eyes shot open. The room surrounding him was a blur; he blinked, trying to bring it into focus. The hands on his shoulders shook him harder, Morgan let out an involuntary yelp.

"I'm up! I'm up!" he sputtered frantically, flailing his arms about.

"Are you sure?" the voice asked him.

He rubbed his eyes and looked up. Towering over Morgan stood one of the biggest men he'd ever seen. He was powerfully built and clad fully in thick scale armor. Two large, heavy looking swords were crossed in sheaths over his back. Their pommels jutted out over either of his shoulders. His blue eyes gazed down intently at Morgan.

"...Well?"

"Yes, yes, I'm awake." Morgan answered. He stretched his arms out in front of his body and yawned. "How long was I out?"

The big man shrugged and ran his fingers through his dark hair. Streaks of gray were just beginning to make themselves visible. "I don't know. I've only been here about an hour."

Morgan frowned, "What time is it?"

"About midday," the man answered, "Minister Adlus arrived a few minutes ago. He'll see you now."

"Ah, thank you." Morgan said, standing up. The large man stood easily a head and a half above him. He stretched again, his aching muscles feeling much better now, and walked to the door - the big man following closely behind him. He took a deep breath, and knocked.

"Come in," a nasal voice called from the office.

Morgan opened the door and stepped in. The office was by no means large, but was comfortable. A large wooden desk sat in the middle of the room, papers stacked all over its top. Behind it sat a balding, heavy-set, middle aged man. His beady eyes squinted at Morgan over his large round nose.

"Enjoy your nap?" he crowed.

Morgan stiffened, "Forgive me Minister. I spent the night traveling from Tursh..."

Adlus cut him off, "Yes, yes and the walk left you quite tired, I'm sure," he said shuffling some papers, "Now then, let's get down to business, shall we?"

The Minister cleared his throat loudly, "You're probably wondering why I called you back from your leave," he said, and continued before Morgan could reply, "Well the reason is simple. It seems something has the blasted Halflings all up in arms. Stories of "monsters" killing their livestock and frightening their old women or some such nonsense."

"You don't sound too convinced," Morgan said.

"Pure rubbish, I'm sure, it's probably just a pack of wolves." He sighed, "Halflings scare so easily. None the less, we're obliged to go and see for ourselves... Well, you are anyway," he added with a grin.

"Forgive me for saying so Minister, but--" Morgan started.

"Yes I know, Rindol Field isn't normally your responsibility." Adlus interrupted. "It is this time though, so don't bother trying to argue with me about it."

"Can I ask why?"

"No!" Adlus cackled gleefully, leaning back in his chair.

"My apologies Minister," Morgan said, "I wasn't questioning your judgment, it's just that this is the first time you've assigned me...well, anything really. I'm just curious as to why is all."

"First time I've assigned you anything!" Adlus said incredulously, "I spoil you for years and this is the thanks I get."

Morgan nearly choked. He stared at the Minister coldly. Adlus coughed and straightened himself, "Oh all right, if you simply must know," he said, "it's because you're the only one I can spare at the moment."

"Oh?" he asked, his interest piqued.

"Our able men are scattered about the Highlands and Falgarholm." Adlus continued, his tone more sober, "Troublesome reports coming out of there..." he said, trailing off, "But that is of no consequence. Your assignment is to investigate what has the Halflings upset - and to calm them down if at all possible. Some warm milk and a blanket ought to do the trick." The Minister chuckled quietly to himself.

"What sort of trouble could be coming from Falgar—?" Morgan pressed.

"Never you mind!" The Minister said irritably, "You're to go deal with the Halflings. You'll be leaving immediately. Stop at the stables and get a horse, then gather supplies if you must but I want you on the road by dawn tomorrow at the latest."

"Very well then," Morgan said as he turned to leave, accepting defeat.

"Oh, and one other thing, Morgan," Adlus added and gestured towards the entrance of the office, "Zanadar will be accompanying you."

Morgan turned - the big man who had woken him had quietly slipped into the room and was standing straight against the wall. Zanadar bowed his head slightly to the ranger.

Morgan paused. "...all right," he said hesitantly, "It will be nice to have some company for once."

"Good, now off with you," the Minister said with a flick of his wrist, "I've a lot of work to get done and can ill afford to waste time with idle chatter."

The two men quickly exited the room. Morgan opened his mouth as if to say something, but Adlus' shrill voice called out behind them, "Close the door, please!"

Zanadar reached back into the office and quietly shut the door. He looked back to the ranger and grinned. "Ass," he said.

Morgan blinked. "What?"

"The Minister is an ass," he placed a hand on his stomach, "I'm hungry, are you hungry?"

Morgan grinned devilishly, "I could eat."

Zanadar smiled as he headed towards the hallway, "Don't forget your pack."

Morgan snatched his traveling pack off the floor next to the chair and rushed to catch up with Zanadar. "The messenger found me during supper last night; I had to leave without finishing."

The big man looked back over his shoulder, "You could have finished."

"I should have."

Zanadar nodded.

Morgan frowned, "I'll finish next time."

The big man grinned, "No you won't."

He thought a moment. "No... I probably won't," Morgan conceded. He looked around, "Hey, we're not going the right way. The entrance was back that way," he said, pointing the other direction.

"I know," Zanadar replied as they began to ascend a flight of stairs, "We've got one short stop to make first."

FINDING A FRIEND

A small but busy looking group of government workers carrying stacks of documents rushed onto the steps and began to hurriedly make their way down, chattering incomprehensibly to one another.

"What's that?" the ranger asked, dodging an oblivious official.

"We've got to pick someone up."

"Who?"

Zanadar turned back to Morgan as he reached the top of the stairs, "You're just full of questions aren't you?"

Morgan suddenly felt a bit sheepish, "Sorry... this is just a bit... unusual. I can't say I've been given too many big assignments yet, but I was under the impression the rangers didn't employ any real outside help unless matters were quite serious."

"What? You don't think I could be a ranger?" Zanadar said with a feigned hurt.

"Well," Morgan shrugged, "You aren't, are you?"

The big man grinned, "No, you are correct -- I am not."

"Is your friend then?" Morgan asked.

Zanadar laughed deeply. "Ah...No."

"If you don't mind me asking then," Morgan said, "Why are you here?"

"That's a bit complicated I'm afraid, let's just say I owe Adlus a favor," he answered.

Morgan wasn't convinced, but decided to let the matter drop for the time being. As much as he disliked the Minister he was grateful to be given this opportunity. He knew it wasn't much, but it also wasn't guarding a nearly forgotten road by himself for weeks on end. Still though, Adlus' mention of trouble to the east in the highlands gnawed at his mind. He tried to push the thought out of his head, but to no avail. Something big may be happening

there. Morgan chuckled softly to himself, maybe something big was happening in Rindol Field.

"What are you laughing at?" Zanadar asked, as they rounded a corner.

"Nothing," he answered. "Do you know anything about what's happening in the highlands?" Morgan asked suddenly.

"No," the big man said.

He narrowed his eyes, "I don't know if I believe you."

"The fact that Adlus saw fit to send every available ranger--besides you that is--to the region has me uneasy as well, Morgan. But I assure you, I haven't the slightest idea what is going on over there."

"Fair enough," Morgan said, still not entirely satisfied.

"And here we are," Zanadar stated as the hallway opened into a wide room.

Bookshelves were set wall to wall in neatly arranged rows. An elderly librarian stood behind a table at the far end of the chamber, sorting a stack of tomes. In the center of the room were a small number of long wooden benches. Behind them a large window overlooked the city below. The sea dominated the horizon, as it splashed against the rocky cliffs upon which New Targonor's outer wall was built. Great waves threw themselves at the exposed earth sending white foam spraying all directions before retreating back into the ocean. In the city, antlike workers scurried about the streets busily, negotiating the crowds as they moved from one small building to the next.

Zanadar stepped into the room and looked around. He walked slowly down the side of the chamber, peering down each row of overflowing shelves. After a moment, he came back to the center of the room, shaking his head.

"What?" Morgan asked.

"He's not here. I knew he wouldn't stay, blast it." Zanadar cursed under his breath and walked over to the librarian's counter. "Excuse me," he said. The librarian looked up.

"What?" the old woman asked, somewhat irritably.

"I was hoping you could help me with something, I'm looking for a friend." Zanadar said.

"Unless your friend happens to be a book, I'm afraid I can't help." The librarian went back to her stack of texts.

"He was in here a while ago," Zanadar pressed, "Big white beard, silly hat. Hard to miss, probably very loud. Come to think of it," he added, "you may have kicked him out."

The old woman scowled, "Oh that one. I'm surprised he has any friends. Foulest man to ever set foot in my library. Don't you even think about bringing him back in here. Good riddance, I say."

"Ah, you remember him!" Zanadar smiled, "I don't suppose you know where he went do you?"

"Probably back to the gutter where vagrants like him belong," she growled.

"But he didn't say which gutter specifically?" the big man asked.

The librarian huffed, "That one said a lot of things. A lot of mean things."

Morgan stifled a laugh, "It sounds as if you keep good company," he said quietly. The librarian shot him an icy stare.

"You stay away from that man," she said, "He's a bad influence."

Zanadar nodded. "I agree completely ma'am," he said, "Unfortunately, due to certain circumstances, I must see him." He smiled widely to the librarian, "and it would help me greatly if you had any idea where he went."

The old woman frowned. "Well, he did say something about being thirsty. He mumbled about getting a drink on his way out," she said somewhat begrudgingly.

The big man set his hand on top of the old woman's. "Thank you very much, you've been a wonderful help," he said, still smiling, "And the Great Library itself is not so well kept as yours, I must say."

The librarian began to smile, but caught herself. She straightened, "All right, I told you all I know. Please leave me to my work, these books won't sort themselves."

"Oh, of course," Zanadar apologized, "Again, thank you for your assistance. Keep up the good work!"

Morgan leaned in as they left the library. "I get the feeling you've practiced that," he said. "So where are we going then?"

Zanadar grinned, "To get a drink."

"There's a lot of places to get a drink in the city," Morgan said, "Your friend could be anywhere."

"I've got a good idea where he went. For as much as he'd like to think he isn't, Elandar is fairly predictable. Don't worry, we can find something to eat there too."

"That's his name?" Morgan asked, "Elandar?"

"Among other things," Zanadar said, "Yes."

The two men made their way out of the keep and back down to the city streets. The sun was now high overhead but the morning's hustle still remained. Zanadar led the ranger back towards the edge of the city, where the buildings were packed even tighter together. He stopped outside a seedy looking tavern; its sign was worn and cracked and hung lopsided on the front of the building.

"Tavern'," Morgan read the sign aloud, "Well, that's pretty straightforward, I suppose."

A series of loud unmistakably female shrieks came from inside the building, followed by the sound of something breaking against the wall and much laughter.

Zanadar nodded. "This is definitely the place," he gestured towards the door, "After you."

ELANDAR

Morgan winced, "Are you sure he's in there?"

Another scream followed by laughter rang out from inside the tavern.

"Very sure," Zanadar said.

Morgan opened the large wooden door and was blasted by a rush of warm air. It reeked of watery ale and sweat. He made a face and stepped inside, Zanadar right behind him.

The tavern was dimly lit and packed tightly with patrons. The stained wooden floor creaked unpleasantly as the two men made their way into the crowd. Rickety old tables were scattered about the floor in no particular order. Men sat in chairs around some, and stood around others while talking loudly amongst themselves, pausing occasionally to shout for more ale.

An angry looking barmaid was doing her best to negotiate through the crowd towards the far end of the tavern. Her dark shoulder length hair stood nearly on end, sticking out in all directions. She had a decidedly murderous look about her.

The barmaid pointed to a skinny old man who sat grinning fiendishly in the corner and shrieked again violently. "Stop it you demented old rat! Stop it right now!" She snatched a tankard off a table and hurled it in his direction.

The old man ducked as it smashed against the wall and raised his bony hands innocently. "Crazy woman!" he shouted back indignantly. The crowd around them roared again in laughter.

The barmaid made a quick grab for another tankard, but Zanadar was faster. "Sascha!" he said pleasantly, "So nice to see you again. You're looking positively radiant, as always."

Sascha spun to face him, a threatening look in her eye. "Make him *stop*," she demanded.

"Stop what?"

"You know what!"

"No really, what's going on?" Zanadar said with a feigned innocence.

"This!" she grabbed at her hair, "This is what's going on!"

"Oh that? Nonsense, I think your hair looks lovely. It's very becoming," he nodded assuredly.

Sascha stared at him a moment and growled angrily. "Don't even start with me Zanadar, you're just as bad as him." She looked back to the old man in the corner, "You have to the count of three to stop it or I am going to tear you to pieces. Do you hear me?"

"No!" the old man shouted back, shaking his fist.

Sascha glared angrily at him and began to count, "...One...Two..."

"You don't scare me!"

Sascha opened her mouth to say three, but suddenly her hair began falling back to its normal position, settling comfortably. She shot the old man a dangerous look and stomped off to the kitchen. Morgan followed Zanadar over to where the old man sat.

"Enjoying yourself?" the big man asked.

The wiry old man grumbled irately, "What kind of world do we live in when a man can't even sit down to enjoy a cup of brew without having to dodge flying crockery!"

Zanadar nodded solemnly, "It's a sad reflection of our times."

The old man's eyes widened as he felt the tip of his hat. "She got my hat wet!" he complained. He removed the pointed cloth cap from his head; its end tipped slightly backwards and was splotted with wetness.

"Morgan," Zanadar said and gestured towards the elderly man at the table, "This is Elandar."

Elandar looked at Zanadar expectantly as he dried the tip of his hat on his robes, as if waiting for something.

"Forget it," Zanadar said, "I'm not saying it. I told you last time was it, no more."

Morgan blinked, confused, "Say what?"

Elandar cleared his throat deeply, "Mighty Wizard! Elandar, Mighty Wizard!"

Zanadar shook his head and sat down, "Mighty indeed. Have a seat Morgan."

Elandar tugged at his long white beard, eyeing the ranger suspiciously. "So you're the pup we have to watch after?"

"Oh I'm sure he's quite capable, try not to offend him until after we eat at least," the big man interjected.

Morgan looked at the old man. Elandar was taller than him, but still not nearly as large as Zanadar. His wiry frame was hidden from view under thick dark purple robes which Morgan got the feeling also concealed a goodly amount of other things he'd rather not know about. His long white unkempt hair rolled off his head in seemingly random directions and landed in a tangled mess just past shoulders. The old man's beard was in an equal state of disarray. Leaning against the wall behind him was a worn wooden staff which looked to be older than Elandar himself.

The ranger spoke up, "Speaking of eating..."

"I think it may be a while before Sascha is ready to come back over here," Zanadar said, "Why don't I just go let her know we're ready myself so she doesn't have to?"

"An excellent question, what is keeping you?" Elandar asked.

The big man stood up, "I'll be right back." He looked to the wizard, "Elandar, be nice."

The old man wagged his finger wildly at Zanadar, "I'm no child! I'll not be ordered around by some sword swinging meathead!"

Zanadar rolled his eyes and wandered off to find Sascha. Elandar put his hat back on his head and stared at Morgan, narrowing his eyes.

"So..." Morgan said, a bit uneasily, "...that's a nice staff."

"Don't you be getting any bright ideas, nobody touches Elandar's staff but Elandar! It's very powerful and very-"

"Mighty?" Morgan grinned.

Elandar folded his arms across his chest and frowned. Morgan leaned back in his chair and scanned the crowd for Zanadar, who was nowhere to be seen. He sighed, and set his chair back down on its legs again. He absently tapped his fingers along the top of the table, trying to avoid eye contact. Morgan glanced up; the old man was staring at him coldly.

"All right, I'm sorry," Morgan said finally, "I take it back, your staff isn't mighty."

Elandar's frown deepened and his stare intensified. For a moment, Morgan was positive the old man was going to start shaking and explode.

"You and Zanadar are friends then?" the ranger asked. Elandar stared back stone like, unblinking. He coughed anxiously and looked around again.

"There's a roasted boar on the spit this afternoon," Zanadar reported finally, coming up behind them. He was carrying three large cups of a dark groggy ale. He set them on the table and looked to Elandar. "Sascha said she's going to bring some out for us and that if you try any funny business she's going to stab you with a meat hook."

The old man broke his stare and took on a contemplative look. "Fair enough," he decided, "I'm hungry enough to risk it."

"That's comforting," Zanadar said as he sat back down. He grinned "So, are you two old friends yet?"

"I didn't say a single mean thing," Elandar boasted. The big man raised an eyebrow at Morgan.

"Well, technically that's true," he said.

"Well then," Zanadar said, placing a hand on each of their shoulders, "I'd say this is going very well!"

A thought suddenly occurred to Morgan. "Does Minister Adlus know Elandar is accompanying us?"

SASCHA'S MEATHOOK

The big man took a small sip of his ale and set it down. "No, he probably doesn't."

"*Probably* doesn't?"

"Well I'm not a mind reader. I supposed it's possible he could know, yes. But I find it highly unlikely."

"You didn't tell him then?"

"Me? No, I didn't." Zanadar answered.

"Does he know Elandar?"

The wizard smirked darkly, "We've met."

"Is that why you didn't tell him Elandar was coming with us?" Morgan asked.

Zanadar looked to the old man. "I told you this one was capable. I had a good feeling about him from the beginning."

Elandar shrugged, "I'm still undecided. He disrespected my staff."

"Oh," Zanadar said seriously, "You've got to be mindful of that Morgan." He grinned at the ranger.

"I'll... be more careful of that in the future," Morgan said, unsure quite how to respond. "So Adlus doesn't know Elandar is coming with us," He continued, "and if he did, he'd most likely disapprove. Is that right?"

"Think of it this way," Zanadar answered coolly, "He didn't say Elandar *couldn't* come, now did he?"

Just then Sascha appeared out of the crowd, carrying a large plate of steaming roast boar. She scowled at Elandar. The old man snorted defensively. Sascha looked to Zanadar, "Did you tell him about the meat hook?"

The big man nodded, "Yes ma'am. I wouldn't dare think not to." She glared meanly at Elandar.

"Egads woman!" he said, "I didn't do anything! I'm *hungry*!"

Keeping a watchful eye on the old wizard she carefully set the plate down on the table in front of them. She took a step back and looked at Elandar suspiciously. "There's your blasted boar, don't even *think* about trying anything."

The old man sputtered indignantly and muttered something under his breath.

"Thank you Sascha," Zanadar said, smiling pleasantly, "This looks very good. We appreciate it."

"You're welcome," she said, still watching Elandar closely. The wizard eagerly reached for the boar and began to tear off a large chunk of meat. Satisfied, Sascha slowly backed away from the table and went back to the other patrons.

Morgan helped himself to a fair sized portion and began to eat. He hadn't realized how hungry he actually was. "I'm still not comfortable with this," he said between mouthfuls.

"Morgan," Zanadar said, "Do you always do everything you're told?"

"Not *always*, no." he replied defensively, "But if Adlus wouldn't like-"

"Adlus doesn't know, he doesn't need to know and as much fun as it would be if he found out, he probably won't. I think you overestimate your beloved Minister, Morgan. I don't know if you'd noticed or not, but he's not exactly the most astute person in the world."

"But still-"

"Look at it this way," the big man said patiently, "What is the worst that could happen? He'll send you back to what you were doing before? That's the fun part about being at the bottom, there's no room to get demoted."

"Oh that's really reassuring," Morgan replied.

"But true!" Elandar cut in gleefully.

"All right, I couldn't get demoted. But I could be dismissed from the rangers altogether," Morgan said.

"Even better!" the old man said excitedly, "Then you'd be able to actually make something of yourself."

"The rangers are a good organization, you know." Morgan said, a bit annoyed. "We keep the roads safe, risking our own well being to do so, we keep a constant lookout for any danger even in the harshest conditions, and we don't ask for anything in return."

"And you're humble." Elandar added, "Don't forget humble."

"Well if you think the rangers are so useless then why are you so eager to work with one?"

Zanadar grinned. "You stepped right into that one, old man."

"I stepped into nothing!" he replied indignantly. "There was a time when the rangers provided a valuable service. Now they're little more than a foppish bunch of ne'er-do-wellers more worried about impressing the ladies than doing their jobs."

"Now that's just a bit unfair Elandar," Zanadar said, "look at Morgan - how many ladies do you think he's impressed lately?"

Morgan looked to the big man. "I thought you were on my side!" he said.

"I am on your side, I was defending you."

"I'm the one attacking you, you dandified little tenderfoot!" Elandar said, shaking a piece of meat wildly at the ranger.

Morgan rubbed his eyes wearily and looked at the two men sitting across from him. *Well, he thought, at least it's not the road.*

"You're not going to cry are you?" the old man asked, "that would be terribly embarrassing."

"No," Zanadar said, "But I think he may just brain you with his mug if you aren't careful." He gave Morgan an appraising look, "Isn't that right?"

Morgan brought himself back into focus. "I don't know," he said, smirking, "He may be too mighty."

The big man laughed deeply. "Yes, he very well may be."

It did not take long for the three men to finish their meal. Morgan still had reservations about keeping Adlus in the dark, but decided to let the matter drop for the time being. Elandar accompanying them may upset the Minister if he found out, but Morgan was willing to take that risk if it meant getting a real assignment. And although he was quite sure they'd never met before there was something about the old man that seemed oddly familiar.

Zanadar yawned expansively and set down his mug. "That was quite pleasant."

"If you say so," the old man complained, "I've had better."

The big man glanced at Elandar's empty plate. "You sure ate a lot of it," he said.

"Don't you look at me like that, I was hungry! I hadn't eaten all day."

"Poor neglected old man," Zanadar teased. "So then," he asked, looking to Morgan, "Now that we're fed, what is the next order of business?"

"Why are you asking him?" Elandar demanded incredulously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to ask him?"

Elandar scowled deeply at the big man. Zanadar laughed heartily and looked back to the ranger. "He looks positively silly when he gets himself all worked up like that," he grinned, "We've got a few hours before night fall yet. Why don't we make any preparations that are needed in that time and then head back here?"

"You want to spend the night here?" Morgan asked, "Adlus seemed to want us on our way as soon as possible."

"Adlus said we needed to leave by tomorrow *morning* at the latest, and I don't know about you but sleeping in a nice comfortable bed sounds much more appealing to me than sleeping in a nice comfortable pile of dirt off the side of the road. This is the last chance we'll likely have to get a good night's rest for a while, I'd take advantage of it," he grinned crookedly and gave a brief shrug, "But that's just me."

Morgan thought it over for a moment, weighing his options. He was eager to get back on the road but the big man had a point, and a warm, cozy bed

sounded very appealing to him just now. "A good full night of sleep in a bed does sound fairly pleasant," he admitted.

"Oh, *fairly pleasant!*" Elandar echoed mockingly, "Offer the pup an alternative to sleeping on the cold ground and its only *fairly pleasant*. Old enough to carry a weapon but too young to appreciate a good, soft bed. I'm already frightened of him."

Zanadar rolled his eyes. "So we'll stay the night, Morgan?"

Morgan thought for a moment and then nodded. "I suppose if we leave early it shouldn't be too big of an issue. We'd just need to be quick about it."

"And so it shall be! King Tenderfoot has spoken!" Elandar proclaimed loudly. Several of the taverns patrons turned their heads towards the group, amusement in their eyes. "The world may continue now," the old man finished, with a dramatic sweep of his arm.

Morgan suddenly felt a bit foolish. He started to say something but Zanadar, seemingly sensing his discomfort, spoke up. "Oh hush you old windbag, Morgan just has a conscience. I know the great lengths you've gone through to lose yours, but despite what you think, it's still a good thing to have."

"It certainly is!" Elandar retorted, "Look how far it's gotten you, after all."

The big man narrowed his eyes, "How would you like me to tie your beard in a knot?"

The old man huffed, and turned away. Morgan couldn't help but laugh a bit at that. "Thanks," he said to Zanadar.

The big man smirked, "I tie good knots too. He'd never get it undone," he paused a moment, "We should probably be on our way then."

Morgan nodded as Zanadar waved his hand in the air, gesturing for Sascha, and began to unfasten the coin purse from his worn belt.

"There's no need for that Morgan," Zanadar stated simply, "I'll take care of this one."

"Nonsense, I ate my share and I'll pay for my share," the ranger said as he reached into the purse and pulled out a few small coins.

"Its quite alright, it was my idea to come here anyway."

"Actually it was *my* idea," Elandar reminded the big man.

"Why, you are absolutely right old man," Zanadar agreed, "Why don't you pay then?"

Elandar frowned, his bushy eyebrows moving seemingly independent of one another. "Never mind, it was your idea," he said.

"Just like I thought," the big man grinned.

Just then Sascha reappeared at the table, squeezing her way through the crowd. She gave the three men a severe look, "Are you ready to leave?"

BOLTED

"I think we just about are, dear Sascha," Zanadar answered, "It seems we've just got two small issues to resolve before we're on our way. Maybe you could help us out."

"If this is some kind of trick..." she said dangerously, trailing off.

The big man laughed. "No tricks, I promise."

"Then what is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well," he began, "first, it seems our new young companion here is under the impression I'm going to let him pay for this absolutely delicious meal you've provided for us. Now, I tried to tell him that I would take care of it but he's insisting that he pay his share. Would you please be so kind as to tell him that I always pay?"

Sascha brightened a bit and looked to Morgan. "Zanadar always pays," she said sweetly, "because Elandar never can."

"See?" Zanadar said to the ranger, interrupting Elandar's lively protest, "I told you I always pay."

"That doesn't settle anything. I could have told you Elandar never paid for anything before you even asked Sascha," he said, as the old wizard sputtered indignantly, "And you can pay for Elandar if that makes you happy, but I will be paying my own way."

"Morgan, is it?" Sascha asked.

Morgan nodded, "Yes."

"He's impossible," she said knowingly, "believe me, he will not quit. I suggest you just let him pay for you and then try not to kill him when he acts all smug about it."

Morgan frowned. "Fine," he said after a moment, "But only if I can pay for the room tonight."

Her smile faded immediately, "Room tonight? I thought you said you were leaving?" She looked to Zanadar, "You said you were leaving!"

The big man leaned back in his chair. "It's so nice to be appreciated, you know. People can try to say that it doesn't matter, but they're just being humble. When someone loves your company this much..." he gestured at Sascha, "it really is heartwarming."

"You said you were leaving!" Sascha insisted.

"Well that was actually the second bit. You see, we're about to undertake a perilous, and very heroic mission to save the world," Zanadar explained, "but after thinking about it we decided it would be really very nice if we could get a good night's rest, just one last time, on a nice, soft bed before we go. Now, this fine establishment has rooms, I've stayed here before. So we figured... we're already here, why not just stay?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"You act all mean and tough," Zanadar said pleasantly, "but I know you'd be disappointed if we left."

"Oh I simply *do not* know what I'd do," Sascha responded, her voice laced in sarcasm. She sighed dramatically, "How many rooms do you need?"

"Two." the big man answered cheerfully, "That way Morgan can pay for his own still."

"That was a mean trick," Morgan accused.

Zanadar grinned. "I know, I'm a mean person."

"Our last two rooms for tonight," Sascha said. She held out her opened hand expectantly, "And not that I don't trust you, of course. But we'll need that up front."

"Oh, of course," Zanadar replied, counting out a small number of coins. He piled them neatly in Sascha's outstretched hand and smiled, "There you go!"

"Thanks," she said with a forced smile. She turned to Morgan, who was loosening the strings on his coinpurse, "And you," she continued, "can pay in the morning." With that, Sascha turned neatly on her heels and went back to the kitchen.

Morgan looked up in bewilderment, "Well, she seems nice enough."

The big man frowned, "She did that out of spite, you know."

"Maybe she just likes me more."

Elandar narrowed his eyes, "No, that couldn't be it."

Zanadar took one last drink from his tankard and set it down on the table. "Well," he said standing up, "We'd best be off then. There aren't many things that I need to get before we go, but I'd like to get as much sleep as possible tonight. So let's get moving."

The three men gathered up their belongings and exited the tavern. A brisk sea breeze greeted them as they emerged back onto the streets of New Targonor. Although evening was fast approaching, the sun still shown brightly and the city streets remained a hive of activity.

"What do you need to get, Morgan?" Zanadar asked.

"The only thing I really need to do is notify the stable master at the keep that we'll need our horses ready for tomorrow morning." He tapped the large traveling bag slung over his shoulder, "I've got just about everything else I need in here."

"Good," the big man said. He glanced at Elandar, "most people don't come that prepared."

"Don't you look at me that way, I've got everything I need!"

"Anyway," Zanadar said, ignoring the wizard, "the smithy isn't far from your stables. We can stop there on the way."

"Fair enough," Morgan replied, "what do you need from the smithy?"

The big man tugged at the hilt of one of the large swords strapped across his back. "Repairs," he answered slyly.

Zanadar lead the way into the crowded streets, maneuvering with surprising agility through the throngs of people. Morgan struggled to keep up, dodging in and out of the way of workers and pushcarts. He was sure they would lose the grumpy old wizard moving at this speed, but every time he looked back to check, Elandar still followed closely, muttering to himself all the while. The old man certainly had spirit, Morgan gave him that.

At their pace, it was not long before they were standing in front of a slightly run down, old looking building. Its two stories were splotched with dark smoke spots and the tiled windows were covered by a thin layer of ash. The piercing, heavy metallic clang of metal striking metal rang out from inside the building, sending vibrations down Morgan's spine. Zanadar opened the door, just as another loud strike rang out from inside. Morgan winced involuntarily as he covered his ringing ears and followed the big man into the smithy.

The blacksmith's forge was dimly lit, and smelt of burning coals. A grimy smoke wafted through the air and seemed to stick upon everything it touched. Racks stuffed with various weapons and tools lined the walls and a long wooden counter split the room in two. Metal spikes and bolts lay strewn across its scarred top. Behind it an aging, barrel chested man stood hunched over the forge, his back to the door. He held in one hand a large hammer. The other was wrapped in a dirty looking rag and clung tightly to an iron handle protruding from the pulsing orange glow of the forge. He drew back the hammer to strike at the hot ember once more.

"Ho there, Grodek!" Zanadar called out.

The blacksmith brought the hammer crashing down, filling the room with a shrill ringing as sparks leapt silently away from his blow.

"I said, ho there, Grodek!" Zanadar called out again.

The smith brought his hammer clanging down upon the forge another time, paying the big man no attention. Zanadar frowned. Elandar muttered under his breath and pushed to the front, making his way towards the counter.

"Why do I always have to do everything myself?" he grumbled as he snatched one of the large metal bolts from the countertop and flung it at the oblivious blacksmith. The bolt sailed across the room and collided against the smithy's backside with a dull thud.

GRODEK

"Zanadar!" he bellowed loudly, wiping the sweat from his brow, "I didn't hear you fellers come in."

The blacksmith groaned and set down his hammer. "My hearing isn't what it used to be, believe it or not," he said walking towards the counter.

"You don't say?" Zanadar joked, "I hadn't noticed."

Grodek laughed and leaned on the counter heavily. "It's been a while, what brings you to my shop?"

"Well, I need a repair to one of my blades. I need it done quickly though, is there any chance you could have it finished by tomorrow morning?"

The smith rubbed his chin contemplatively. "That's not much time, I'll have to see the damage."

Zanadar nodded and wrapped his hand around one of the large hilts protruding from over his shoulder. With one quick movement he drew the heavy sword from its sheath and held it in front of him, a noticeable dent had been etched into its side.

"That's a mighty big sword," Grodek said, "I'll never understand how it is you're able to use two of them fellers at once."

"He just wears them to look scary," Elandar stated as Zanadar set the sword down on the countertop.

Grodek leaned over the blade, examining it carefully. "That's an awful big dent," he observed, "How did you manage that one?"

Zanadar chuckled a bit uneasily. "It hit a piece of metal."

The smithy looked up from the sword. "That's it?" he asked, "that must have been some piece of metal." Grodek gave the big man an amused look, "I think you're holding back on me."

"Well, it was two pieces of metal really, I suppose. And it only damaged my blade because they were moving at an awkward angle."

The blacksmith grinned knowingly. "That's from another sword, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is," Zanadar admitted somewhat guiltily.

"So what was the second piece of metal then?"

"Well that was the armor of the fellow holding the sword," he answered.

Grodek winced and shook his head. "I don't even want to know."

"So do you think you'll be able to have it fixed by tomorrow morning?"

"I thought you knew me better than that, Zanadar!" Grodek answered, "Of course I can have it ready by tomorrow morning. The question is can you afford to pay me to have it ready by tomorrow morning?"

"Now there's the Grodek I know." Zanadar replied. He loosened the strings on his money purse and picked out a few shiny coins. He looked backed to Morgan, who had been standing quietly in the background as the two men talked. "I seem to be doing this a lot today," he said glumly. The big man turned back to the blacksmith. "You haven't gone and raised your prices on me, have you?"

Grodek held up his hands defensively. "I would never do such a thing. I still charge the same exorbitant amount for you as I always have."

"You could make him pay more, you know." Elandar suggested irritably.

"Nonsense," the blacksmith responded, "There was a time when Zanadar almost single-handedly kept me in business. I can only hope that a war will break out so your big friend has an excuse to go start breaking things again. I could really use a few new horses, or a bigger shop."

"That's a terrible thing to say," Zanadar said with a grin as he set the coins next to his sword on the counter.

"But it's true all the same!"

"Well, I can't really argue that."

"So," the blacksmith said pointing to Morgan, "Who is your friend back there?"

"Oh, how rude of me," the big man apologized, "Grodek, this is Morgan Derek."

Morgan gave the blacksmith a friendly nod, "Pleased to meet you."

"So what's your business with these two troublemakers, Morgan?" the blacksmith inquired.

"The three of us are headed out of the city on ranger business," Morgan explained, "Zanadar and I are assigned to work together."

Grodek frowned, his deep wrinkles creasing his forehead. "Well that was disgustingly vague," he said sourly, "I see Zanadar is already rubbing off on you."

"No, he came that way," Elandar responded crankily.

Zanadar laughed. "Well, he is a fast learner."

"So you're working with the rangers now?" Grodek pushed.

"It would seem that for the moment I am," the big man answered with a smile.

Grodek threw his hands up in the air. "Blast it all, try not to be too forthcoming there, Zanadar!" he said, "I wouldn't want you to give away any official state secrets or anything. Even for an old friend like me, it's just not worth it."

"You know you're right," Zanadar answered sardonically, "I ought to watch what I say. So you'll have the blade ready tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah, yeah," the blacksmith grumbled, "you can pick it up anytime after dawn."

The big man cringed, "I'm afraid we're going to be leaving a little earlier than that."

Grodek cursed. "So I get to work all night *and* get up early. I sure am glad my old friend Zanadar stopped by to visit today."

"That's the spirit!"

"I could certainly use a little 'spirits' right now, if you catch my drift," the smith said hopefully.

Zanadar laughed. "We will see you tomorrow morning, Grodek," he said with a wave, "Thank you very much, of course, for your time. It is greatly appreciated."

The three men made their way out of the blacksmith's shop and back into the city. The central keep loomed over the streets as the sun sank lower into the horizon. It was not far to the stables, and the group walked briskly out the inner gate and around the towering walls until they reached New Targonor's parade grounds.

The jousting fields Morgan had passed earlier were now empty, the riders from the morning had abandoned their training for the day hours ago and the field sat empty, save for a few squires grooming their masters steeds.

A long wooden structure sat apart a small distance from the field's grandstands. It was open from either end and both the noises and smell permeating from the building left no question in the minds of any unsure travelers that these were indeed the city's stables.

Inside, the ground was covered with a matted layer of dry hay. A variety of horses filled the stalls lining both walls, sticking their heads out eagerly as the three men passed, hoping for treats. The stables were not nearly as crowded as the streets outside. Only a few stable hands scurried back and forth, busily attending to the animals. Morgan led the group to the center of the building and stopped next to an open stall.

"Well hello there, Morgan!" a friendly sounding voice called from inside the stall.

CORNERED

Morgan smiled politely. "Hello yourself, Renna."

A short, dark haired girl, who looked to be about the same age as Morgan emerged from the horse stall. She had a slender build and wore dark brown pants and a loose fitting grey tunic, bits and pieces of straw clung to her mussed hair. She rubbed her dark eyes wearily.

"Am I interrupting something?" Morgan asked.

"What?" Renna responded, confused.

Morgan pointed at the straw dangling from the girl's hair.

"Oh that!" she said brushing it away, "No you weren't interrupting anything. I was already awake anyway."

"Sleeping *on the job*?" Elandar gasped incredulously.

"Well I wouldn't say that," the girl said impishly, "more like working between naps." She turned her head slightly at the old man. "I don't believe we've met, I'm Renna!" she said, extending her hand.

Elandar ignored the gesture. "In my day we'd have been stoned for such insolence!" the old wizard spat angrily. "I ought to notify your superior."

"Her superior is Adlus," Morgan responded.

The old man cursed and took on a sour expression.

"Anyway," Morgan continued, "I do have a reason for being here-"

"Yes, yes, Minster Weasel sent word earlier."

"Sssh!" Morgan whispered, looking over his shoulder, "Not so loud, what if someone hears you? You really shouldn't speak of Adlus like that, so...openly."

"I sure hope the horses don't tell on me," she said sarcastically.

"Still," he said stubbornly, "it's not right."

Renna rolled her eyes. "All right, his esteemed Excellency Minister Adlus of New Targonor hath sent word to me, verily, of your impending arrival. He doth assure me in your company shall be one great oaf who doth respond to thy calling of Zanadar. Henceforth, upon your arrival, I, stablehand Renna am hereby obliged to offer you two mounts of unmatched quality for assistance in thy realm of speediness... *verily*."

The girl scanned the three men, her gaze stopping upon Zanadar. "You must be the oaf," she said, "Pleased to meet you!"

The big man frowned. "Did he really call me an oaf?"

"I'm afraid so," Renna nodded solemnly. "So..." she asked Morgan sweetly, "how is Gillian?"

"She's doing well." Morgan answered, "She'd be happy that you asked."

"Oh I'm sure she would be. Has she decided to come to the city yet?"

He shook his head. "No, she's still very at home in Tursh. I don't suspect that will change much anytime soon."

Renna wrinkled her nose. "I'll never know what it is you two see in that place. But I do know what when I finally convince Gillian to come to New Targonor that you'll be close behind." She smirked devilishly. "And *then*... you'll be in trouble Morgan Derek."

Zanadar raised an eyebrow.

"Never mind." Morgan said quickly, "About those horses?"

Renna laughed wickedly. "Of course!" she said, "For you, nothing but two of our finest animals."

Elandar cleared his throat loudly.

"Actually," Zanadar added, "we'll need three."

Renna looked to Morgan, he nodded. "We seemed to have gained another person."

"Oh, I don't know..." she trailed off playfully, "Minister Adlus specifically said there would be *two* of you. I wouldn't want to disobey him."

"Don't you even think about getting smart with us, you little nuisance!" Elandar squawked.

"I wasn't being smart, I promise. I am just trying to do a good job. I don't know *what* would happen if I were to give you three horses when instructed to only let you have two. Why, in *your* day I could be stoned for such insolence," she said tartly.

"Conniving wench!" the old man bellowed, nearly choking. "I ought to turn you *into* a horse!"

"Then I could kick you out of my stables with four feet instead of just two."

Morgan winced. "Let's not do anything drastic."

"I have to apologize for my venerable companion," Zanadar said, stepping in front of the old wizard, "He's very old, you see, and quite upset by the fact. He also won't fit on a horse with me, and as you can probably imagine, I don't think Morgan is particularly enthused by the prospect of sharing a mount with him either. If we had a third horse, you would be doing us a tremendous favor. There must be some way we can convince you."

Renna gave Morgan a pointed look. "You know what I want."

The ranger gulped heavily, he could feel himself blushing. "Could we just buy it, perhaps?" he asked.

"You know as well as I these horses aren't for sale Morgan," she said with a devastating grin.

Morgan squirmed about uneasily, from which Renna seemed to derive some sort of cruel pleasure. He looked to Zanadar, desperation in his eyes.

"Maybe we could rent one?" the big man interjected.

Renna sighed in disappointment and took her eyes off the ranger. "That sounds a lot like bribery to me."

"I apologize, I didn't mean to imply-"

"Lucky for you I'm very susceptible to bribes," she interrupted cheerfully, "How much have you got?"

Zanadar grumbled and once again loosened the strings on his coin purse and looked inside. "Not nearly as much as I had this morning," he muttered. He emptied the purse into his hand and counted out a few of the larger coins. "How's that?" he asked, showing them to Renna.

"It looks like a joke to me," she responded.

"I can match that," Morgan said, adding several more coins to the pile in Zanadar's hand.

"Now we're getting somewhere. What about you, old man?" she said to Elandar, "It is your horse, after all."

"Don't push your luck missy," he growled.

Renna laughed and tapped her chin absently as she thought. "I suppose that will do," she said and deftly snatched the coins from Zanadar. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you gentlemen."

"We'll stop by tomorrow morning just before dawn to pick up the horses," the big man said.

Renna cringed. "That's quite early."

"Good thing you had a nap." Elandar mumbled as they began to head towards the entrance.

"Good thing," she shot back. Renna smiled dangerously. "I'll see you tomorrow, Morgan."

Morgan gave an uneasy wave and followed the others back out onto the street. The three men began to walk back towards the tavern in silence. The streets remained busy, but a relaxed quiet had fallen over them as the sun gradually disappeared below the horizon. Morgan glanced over at Zanadar. The big man was grinning at him dumbly.

"Don't do that," the ranger said self-consciously.

SLEEP AT LAST

"Don't do what? I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it."

The big man held his hands up defensively. "But I didn't say anything."

A surprised look suddenly shot across Elandar's face, his bushy eyebrows springing to life. He looked about excitedly. "Tenderfoot!" Elandar exclaimed in a hushed tone.

"What?" Morgan answered shortly, without thinking.

The old man leaned in closely, a conspiratorial look about him. "I think that crook running the stables fancies you," he whispered. Elandar took a step back and nodded sagely.

Morgan rolled his eyes and began walking faster. "We need to hurry up and get back to the tavern. We'll need all the sleep we can get tonight."

"She was pretty," Zanadar offered innocently, matching the ranger's pace.

"Shouldn't we be discussing the plan for tomorrow?" Morgan asked.

"There really isn't much to it, I'm afraid. We wake up, get my sword and the horses and then go to Rindol Field," the big man answered. "Who is Gillian?"

Morgan ignored the question.

"Are you courting her?" Zanadar asked. "Your wife perhaps?"

"Wife!" Elandar said. "He's just a boy. He's far too young to be married."

"I don't know Elandar," the big man replied. "Maybe it's a political marriage."

"...and that's why he doesn't walk to talk about it," the old man finished.

"Exactly."

"And that lawless rogue Renna?"

"Well she is just his mistress in the city," Zanadar explained.

"All right!" Morgan said finally, throwing his hands in the air. "She is my sister."

"Who?" Elandar asked.

"Gillian!"

"Ah, now it's all beginning to make sense," Zanadar replied knowingly.

"I told you he was too young to be married," the wizard said. "My advice to you, boy, is to never burden yourself with marriage. Especially not to your sister."

Morgan tried to think of a response, but the best he could muster was a strongly disgusted look.

"You are demented, old man," Zanadar accused. "So Gillian lives in Tursh?"

"Yes," Morgan answered, "she does."

"And Renna wants her to come and live in New Targonor?"

"Yes," Morgan said cautiously, "that is correct."

"What do you think of that idea?"

Morgan turned abruptly. "Why are you interrogating me?"

"Just making conversation," the big man said with a grin.

Soon the three men had made their way back to the tavern on the far end of the city. Thick torches illuminated the side of the building, their flames dancing silently into the crisp night air. Morgan could hear music coming from inside, accompanied by loud voices and occasional bouts of laughter.

The door to the tavern suddenly flew open, flooding the street with the familiar stench of beer and sweat. A short, portly man stumbled out of the entrance and rudely pushed his way past Morgan before staggering off into the darkness. The door began to swing back shut but Zanadar caught it. He gestured for the others to enter.

The inside of the tavern was a sharp contrast to the relative peacefulness of the evening's streets. A small troupe in the corner of the building performed a merry, upbeat tune while the more jovial patrons drunkenly sang along. Workers, retired for the day, lined the walls of the bustling tavern making passage through the crowd difficult.

"You are in rooms five and six. And no matter what the drunk in the common room tells you, room five does not belong to him," a muffled voice called out from somewhere in the crowd.

Morgan scanned the area, attempting to find the source of the voice. A large, heavy-set man standing directly in front of the ranger suddenly lurched forward, as if struck from the other side. Sascha stepped calmly out from behind him, an annoyed look on her face.

"Next time move!" she hollered at the patron. She narrowed her eyes at the three men and held up her hand. Two keys dangled from her clenched fist.

"Thank you," Zanadar said pleasantly, reaching for the keys. Sascha snatched them away at the last second.

"Not so fast," the barmaid said. "You three will be going straight up to bed. I don't need any more trouble down here tonight, and you...", she pointed at Elandar, "are always trouble."

"Blasted wench, I've never done anything wrong."

"*What* did you just call me?"

"Never mind him," Morgan said. "That sounds fine to us. We were planning on going straight up to bed anyway and we will be out of your hair before dawn tomorrow morning." He shifted the traveling pack on his shoulder and pulled a coin from the small pouch on his belt. "In fact," the ranger continued, "why don't you take this now so we can just leave tomorrow without disturbing you?"

Sascha's harsh gaze softened a bit. "That will work just fine. Thank you," she said and took the coin. With that, Sascha handed him the keys, then promptly turned and went back to the other patrons.

"Very diplomatic Morgan," the big man approved. "You *do* learn fast."

"I just want to get this pack off my back," he replied. He looked down at his hand. "Do you want room five or six?"

"We'll take six," Elandar stated.

Zanadar shrugged. "Six sounds good."

Morgan handed the big man the key and lead the way through the crowd towards the rickety staircase at the far end of the building. The second story of the tavern was centered around a single hallway leading from the stairs to a dark common room on the opposite side of the floor. Three doors lined each side of the hall adjacent to one another. Rough looking numbers had been crudely etched into the center of each of the heavy wooden frames.

"Don't worry, its more comfortable than it looks," Zanadar said in a reassuring voice.

"I wasn't worried, it looks fine to me. I'm used to the ground and I doubt it could be any less comfortable than that," Morgan answered as he found the room with a five etched above the door.

Zanadar unlocked and opened the door to his room. "You're probably right. If it were less comfortable than the ground they wouldn't get very much business," he grinned, "now would they?"

"Enough talking!" Elandar scolded harshly. "I'm tired." The cranky wizard tried to push his way past Zanadar. "Get out of my way, meathead."

"And even if it's not very comfortable," the big man continued with a side-long glance in the old man's direction, "at least you don't have to share a room with him."

Morgan laughed softly. "Very true."

"Good night," Zanadar said.

"Good night to you," he replied as the big man and Elandar disappeared into their room for the night. Morgan wasted no time in unlocking the door in front of him and entered.

The room was small, only a bed and a worn looking desk occupied the floor. A smeared window overlooking the alley to the side of the tavern provided the only source of light. The dim glow of the moon filtered through the dirty glass

and settled gently around the room. It looked as if there had once been cloth drapes covering the window, but only their ripped corners now remained hooked to the wall.

Morgan set his pack on the floor and took a seat on the bed. It was surprisingly soft. The big man had been right. He closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. The noise from below was plainly audible, though the music seemed to have stopped for the time being at least. He could hear staggered snoring from the common room and the smell was not much better upstairs than down, but Morgan did not care. He was tired. The previous night's hurried trek from Tursh had worn him out, and he had much on his mind.

He untied the straps holding his traveling pack closed and quietly opened the top, peering in at its contents. A dark leather wrapped hilt poked out through the opening. He thought for a moment then grabbed the hilt and tugged. A blackened, sturdy looking mace slowly worked its way free from the pack. Its shadowy-colored metal was light, making it easy to wield. He had another just like it in his pack.

Morgan turned the mace over in his hand as he thought. He had not expected Adlus to give him a real assignment. And though he was eager for the chance to prove himself, he was more than a little nervous at the prospect of it all. What if there was something in Rindol Field? For that matter, why had this task been assigned to him? What could be occupying the more seasoned rangers to the east in the highlands?

Morgan could not help but chuckle in spite of himself. He doubted that last bit was even true. Adlus had a flair for the dramatic and an even greater affinity for making situations seem much worse than they actually were.

More unexpected still though, was the addition of Zanadar and the cranky old man claiming to be a 'mighty wizard' to his assignment. Perhaps Adlus had sent Zanadar along simply to watch over him, to make sure that he did not foul up the job. Morgan knew better though. It was true, he was a novice, but he was more than capable of taking care of himself and handling matters with discretion. The Minister may not be the most learned man in the city, but he must know that.

So why send Zanadar? The question nagged at Morgan, hanging in front of him, the answer just beyond his reach. The only explanation he could offer was that the big man had been sent because Adlus was not sure he could handle whatever the problem was alone. Zanadar seemed like an intelligent per-

son though. If that were indeed the case why would he bring a frail, delusional old man? Neither of them were even rangers.

The more Morgan thought the more unanswered questions he had. He liked Zanadar though, and knowing that the big man would be there in the event trouble should arise comforted him. Elandar, however, was a different matter entirely. Elandar worried Morgan.

Just then, a sharp pounding erupted from the entrance to the room. Someone was banging violently on the other side of the ranger's door. He tensed and instinctively tightened his grip on the mace, and waited.

YOU'RE IN MY ROOM

The pounding continued in erratic bursts, subsiding for brief moments before beginning again. Morgan stood up and silently began to inch his way towards the door. If it were Zanadar or the old man they surely would have said something by now.

He leaned in close to the door. The heavy wood shook on its hinges with each hit, sending small clouds of dust billowing into the room.

"Who's there?" he called out cautiously.

The banging stopped abruptly.

"I am," a high-pitched, nasal voice replied after a moment.

That didn't help him much. Morgan frowned.

"What do you want?"

"You're in my room," the voice whined pathetically.

Morgan let out a relaxed breath and loosened the grip on his mace. It was only the drunk Sascha had warned about earlier. He fumbled briefly with the lock, then pulled the door open slightly and peered out through the narrow crack.

In the dim light of the hallway stood a sickly-looking, wiry man dressed in rags. His sunken cheeks and long, pockmarked face gave him an emaciated appearance. A thin, scraggly beard grew in patches around his jaw, and dark

circles sat heavily under his eyes. His dirty hair was matted across his forehead. The man was filthy.

Morgan shrank back immediately, disgusted. The drunk's warm breath was putrid, and his stench was thick in the air.

"You're in my room," he repeated, his dry rasp more agitated this time.

"I'm sorry, but you're mistaken friend," Morgan replied, doing his best to avoid the smell. "This is my room. At least it is for tonight."

"You're in my room," the drunk's voice grew steadily louder. "Get out of my room!"

"I'm sorry," the ranger said and began pulling the handle closed.

The filthy man slammed his fist into the door with surprising force. Morgan stumbled back a step, dropping his mace. He heard it hit the floor somewhere behind him. It rolled back loudly before finally settling.

"No!" he shouted angrily at the ranger, his voice stinging with desperation. "Get out of my room!"

The drunk lowered his head and lunged towards the open entrance. Morgan quickly regained his composure and started to swing the heavy door shut. A sickening thud rattled through the frame and up the ranger's arm as the wiry man collided with the thick wood. He heard the drunk stagger back and fall to the ground cursing. Morgan pulled the door open to see him climbing back to his feet, clumsily attempting to regain his balance. A foamy stream of drool dripped out of the corner of his mouth and down the dirty man's chin.

"Please," Morgan said, "I do not want to hurt you. This is my room, just go away."

The drunk paid no attention to Morgan's pleas. His eyes were glazed with a frenzied madness. He clenched his fists tightly and with a blind rage, charged at the ranger.

This time Morgan was ready. He deflected the first blow and sent the filthy man's fist slamming into the doorframe. The drunk screamed in pain as large splinters painfully dug into his knuckles. The ranger kicked the side of the man's knee causing it to twist and buckle awkwardly. He then took a step

back and hurled his fist directly at the drunk, catching him squarely in the jaw.

The wiry man's screams stopped instantly. He toppled to the ground, falling to a crumpled heap at the center of the hallway. Morgan mumbled a curse under his breath and rubbed his hand. He'd swung a bit harder than he had meant to. He sighed and knelt down next to the man. He was not seriously injured, although when he awoke he would not be very happy.

Morgan looked over the unconscious drunk for a moment, examining him. The dim light of the hall made it hard to see his wounds clearly. His jaw was already beginning to bruise and swell - there was nothing Morgan could do about that. The drunk's right hand was smeared with blood. It trickled slowly through his fingers and onto the ground.

Two large splinters had broken from the frame and lodged themselves firmly into the man's knuckles. His hand twitched slightly, and his blood was already beginning to clot around the splinters. Morgan leaned in closely, inspecting the wounded hand. The splinters were not too deep and should be fairly easy to remove. The injury could have been much worse, the drunk was lucky that he was not stronger.

With a skilled hand, Morgan slowly twisted one of the pieces of wood and slid it free from the man's hand. He held the jagged splinter in his palm for a moment. It looked to be largely intact. Nothing had broken off inside the drunk's hand. He discarded the splinter and then carefully removed the second in the same fashion.

When he was finished, he set the man's arm back down on the floor. Morgan sat back on his knees and thought for a moment. "I can't really just leave you here," he said. Morgan scanned the area, his eyes coming to rest on the dark room at the end of the hallway. "You probably came from there, might as well put you back."

The ranger stood up, placed his hands under the drunk's arms and pulled the unconscious man down the hall to the edge of the common room. He could hear snores drifting out of the darkness, it sounded as if there were already several people asleep in the room. He leaned the man against the wall gently. "There," he said, standing up.

Morgan walked back to his room and shut the door behind him. He removed his boots, and then flopped rather unceremoniously onto the bed.



Morning came much sooner than Morgan would have liked. He was awakened by a loud knocking on his door. He sat up in bed and yawned, it was still dark outside. The knocking continued. Morgan slipped out of bed and quietly picked his mace up off the ground. He walked cautiously towards the door, readying himself.

"Who is it?" he called out.

"Its me," Zanadar's voice answered.

Morgan lowered his weapon, relieved. He unlocked the door and pulled it open, Zanadar stood in the hallway. He was already fully armored and carried a fair-sized saddlebag that looked to be about half full. He gazed at Morgan peculiarly.

"Expecting someone else?" the big man asked.

Morgan gave him a confused look.

"Unless that's for me," he said, pointing at the mace, "in which case I'd just as soon go back to bed, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, that," Morgan replied, looking down at the dark, steel weapon in his hand. "Long story."

"I bet," the big man said with a grin, as Morgan put the mace on his bed and sat down to put on his boots. "Does it have anything to do with the blood on the floor out there and the sickly looking fellow with a swollen face propped up against the wall?"

Morgan cringed. "You knew what happened before you even came in here," he accused.

Zanadar just shrugged and continued grinning smugly.

"How bad does he look?" the ranger asked.

"Oh he looks absolutely dreadful, but you're only responsible for the bruises on his face. I suspect a strong drinking habit and a frighteningly ugly mother are to blame for the rest."

"What about his hand?"

"It's fine, just a few small cuts. How did that happen anyway? Those puncture wounds were oddly shaped, almost like teeth."

"He punched the door."

"...and it bit him?"

"Sort of," the ranger answered as he finished tying his boots.

"Well," Zanadar said, holding up a mailed hand. "I'm glad I wore these."

Morgan snatched his mace off the bed and placed it back into his pack. He stood up and slung its straps over his shoulder. "All right, let's go. Elandar is downstairs waiting for us, I assume?"

"You assume correctly."

The two men walked out of the room and back into the hallway. The drunk still lay against the wall near the entrance to the common room. He was asleep and breathed deeply, wheezing loudly as his chest rose and fell. Morgan shut the door and locked it.

"I hope he's not hurt too bad," he said.

"Don't worry about it, Morgan," the big man replied. "He had it coming anyway, making all that noise."

Morgan turned. "You heard him?"

"How could I not?"

"And you didn't come out to help?"

Zanadar shrugged. "You seemed to have the situation under control. No need for me to get in the way."

"Thanks." Morgan said dryly.

CATCH

The tavern was much quieter now. The crowd had nearly dissipated completely, a few of the more slovenly patrons had passed out in their seats at some point during the night and the musical troupe had long since left. Behind the bar, the innkeeper dozed peacefully.

Elandar sat quietly in his chair at the far corner of the room. He glared at the two men as they descended the staircase.

"You certainly took long enough," the old man said.

"We were talking," Zanadar replied.

"Oh? Did Tenderfoot explain about the bloodied up drunk?"

"Yes he did."

"I'm right here, you know," Morgan cut in.

"Give me your key," Zanadar said to the ranger, "I'll go put them back."

Morgan handed the big man the key to his room. He quietly stepped behind the bar and walked just past the sleeping innkeeper, to where a small row of metal rungs hung from the wall. Zanadar hung the keys up and then silently crept back to the others.

"Its bad luck to beat up a drunk," Elandar scolded.

"There was no avoiding it," Morgan explained, "I tried not to hurt him too badly."

"Oh, I'm sure you tried valiantly. As soon as the meathead is ready we can go... if we pass any small children or old women on the way, try not to beat them up."

"I've *been* ready to go," Zanadar said.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's get this over with."

"Fine by me, lead the way old man."

Elandar huffed and leaned on his staff as he stood up. His joints creaked audibly as he walked out the door, causing the old wizard to leave a foul string of curses in his wake.

Zanadar cringed as he looked to Morgan. "That's what we have to look forward to. Depressing, isn't it?"

"I heard that!" Elandar yelled from outside.

The early morning's streets were nearly empty, as they would remain until dawn. With the sun would come workers, merchants and travelers of all sorts - but for now, the city was quiet. They made good time due to the sparsely populated streets, passing the occasional guard or street urchin.

Soon, Grodek's smithy sat plainly in view. A faint glow emanated from the dirty windows and the familiar call of metal striking metal pierced through the crisp ocean air. Zanadar stopped short, causing Morgan to almost run into him.

"That's odd," the big man said.

"What?" Morgan asked.

"Grodek doesn't normally work before sunrise."

"Maybe he's still working on your sword?" the ranger offered.

"Maybe." Zanadar replied. He did not sound convinced. "That'd be awful out of character for him though."

"He's probably just drunk and doesn't know what time it is." Elandar said.

"Now that *would* be much more like him."

The big man had barely finished speaking when a series of loud crashes rang out from the building. A deep, haggard voice screamed viciously from inside. It was human, but primitive, like a cornered animal fighting for its life.

"That's Grodek," Zanadar said sharply. He dropped his bag and took off running towards the entrance.

Morgan started to speak, but decided against it and ran after the big man. He had trouble keeping up with Zanadar's long strides. Despite his armor and

gear, he was surprisingly quick. Morgan could hear more shouting as he raced closer to the building.

Zanadar lowered his shoulder as he neared the heavy wooden door. He let out an angry yell and crashed through it forcefully, bringing the door and sizable part of the frame with him. With a tremendous blast, the door was ripped savagely from the wall. It splintered loudly and crashed onto the floor of the smithy. Zanadar rushed in after it, not losing a step.

It was dark inside, the only illumination the dull pulsing of the embers from the forge. The inside of the building had been thrashed. The long table at the center of the room lay overturned and many of the racks and shelves lining the walls had spilled their contents onto the floor below or sat broken on the ground. The smith's tools were scattered about the floor in disarray.

An overbearing tension hung heavily the room. A man lay face down next to the forge, unmoving. A large sword sat broken on the ground beside him.

Next to it, Grodek stood hunched over, his back to the wall. The stocky man's head was dirty, and bleeding. He gripped his hammer tightly, teeth bared. His muscled arms glistened with sweat, reflecting the orange glow of the forge. They rose and fell with his broad shoulders as the smith breathed deeply. He grinned weakly at the big man.

Four other men also stood in the room, and were staring at the door with startled looks on their faces. They were dressed in dark clothing and wielded a variety of simple cudgels and small blades.

Zanadar stopped, and considered the area coolly for a moment. Morgan slid in behind him, peering wide-eyed at the tattered door fame.

"There are a few possible outcomes to this situation," the big man explained calmly. "And I'll be honest, none of them are terribly pleasant for you gentlemen. But if you run away right now and you promise me I'll never see any of you again... I may let some of you continue to breathe." He reached down and slowly picked up a large wooden board from the broken door off the ground and patted it suggestively. "What's it going to be?"

One of the intruders, a short grimy looking man, pulled a jagged knife from his belt and sent it flying through the air at Zanadar.

"They're the ones!" the man screamed.

Zanadar stepped aside easily as the blade sailed past and smacked against the wall behind him. He grinned dangerously and gave the man who had thrown the knife an amused look.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

The short man fumbled with his belt as Zanadar charged, trying desperately to draw another knife. But the big man was too fast, he drew back and with a rumbling growl he swung the large board upwards. He connected with a devastating blow directly under the man's chin, lifting him off his feet. He landed on his back with a heavy thud and lay still.

The entire room then suddenly began to move at once. A wild-eyed, bulky man brandishing a cudgel rushed towards Morgan. The two other men were larger, each wielding sharp looking short swords, they closed on Zanadar slowly.

Morgan leapt out of the way as the bulky man lunged at him with his cudgel, narrowly missing him. He stumbled back and let his pack fall to the floor, there would be no time to get his weapons from inside of it. Morgan scanned the area around him, trying to find something he could use to defend himself.

He grabbed a large iron hook off the wall and brought it up just in time to beat away another blow. The strike sent vibrations reverberating up the hook and through Morgan's body. He fended away another attack, and then another. He was losing ground quickly. He needed to find an opening.

"Catch!" he heard Zanadar's voice call out.

The bulky man ignored the yell and raised his arms above his head, readying to strike again. For a brief moment a large dark shape appeared over the attacker. Morgan braced himself as the bulky man spun around just in time to see the body of one of the other intruders come crashing down upon him. The two men tumbled to the ground hard, in a mess of knees and elbows. The wild-eyed attacker clawed violently at the unconscious man on top of him, trying to wriggle free.

Morgan looked across the room over to Zanadar. The short man still lay on the floor unmoving. The larger was picking himself up off the ground, a vengeful look in his eyes. He leapt up and swung his short sword at the big man in a blind rage. Zanadar effortlessly stepped out of the blade's path and brought his board crashing down upon the man's head. A loud snap shot through the room as the wooden board splintered in half.

The big man met the ranger's gaze, then grinned and shrugged innocently. He dropped the now useless piece of wood as the intruder toppled to the ground in a heap.

The wild-eyed attacker finally managed to pull himself out from under the unconscious man and jumped to his feet, ready to fight. He surveyed the room for a moment, then dropped his cudgel and ran towards the door.

"Don't let him get away!" Zanadar yelled.

Morgan took careful aim and threw the metal hook at the fleeing attacker. It rapped him sharply on the back of the knee, buckling his leg. He stumbled and fell through the empty door frame, his head meeting the hard ground outside. He turned over wearily and reached for the knife in his belt but instead met with the end of a worn old staff, which thumped him painfully across the forehead and into unconsciousness.

Elandar, carrying the big man's saddlebags, stepped in over the body and eyed his surroundings.

"That was easy," he said snootily as he tossed the bags onto the floor. "What a bunch of amateurs."

NOT EVEN LOCKED

"Thanks old man," Zanadar said sardonically, "We couldn't have done it without you." He turned to the blacksmith. "Are you all right, Grodek?"

"Your head is bleeding," Morgan observed. "Let me take a look at it."

Grodek rubbed his bald head and then held his hand out in front of him, examining it. "It's just a scratch, I'm fine, boy." The smith pointed at the gaping hole where the door had been. "It wasn't even locked you dumb brute!" he roared.

"I guess that's a yes," Zanadar said. He started to absently collect the attackers' weapons and put them in a pile on the floor. "You're welcome, by the way."

"I could have handled it just fine," Grodek responded sourly. He turned around, looking at all the mess. He cursed loudly. "Will someone please tell me, what, exactly that was all about?" he yelled furiously.

"Well I couldn't say for certain, but I believe those men came in here with the intent to attack you," Elandar stated.

Zanadar grabbed a large coil of rope from a hook hanging on the wall and began to bind the men's arms and legs.

The smith glared angrily at the old man. "Don't try me, Elandar."

"They probably came here to rob you and you just caught them by surprise," the big man said as he finished tying up one of the attackers.

Grodek stepped over one of the unconscious men, knelt down, and began to lift up the long wooden table that had been pushed on its side. "Don't think that I buy that nonsense for a second, Zanadar."

"Why not?"

Grodek stared at the big man coldly.

Morgan thought for a moment. "Grodek may be right," he said hesitantly.

Zanadar and the old man shared a brief, uneasy look. "What makes you say that?" he asked, his voice neutral.

"That one," he pointed to the grimy man who now lay bound tightly on the floor, "He said, 'they're the ones'. We are the ones what? What is that supposed to mean? Unless..."

"They were here for you Zanadar," the smith growled, "Who did you kill this time? Why are you in trouble?"

"Oh quit jumping to conclusions," the big man said irritably, "You always assume the worst."

"And I'm always right!" Grodek spat back. "They weren't surprised at all when they came in here and saw me." The smith's eyes widened. "They even knew I was working on your sword!"

Zanadar folded his arms across his chest. "How is that?" he said flatly.

Grodek pointed to the broken sword lying near the forge. "That was the first thing they went for. They didn't even try to attack me until I brained one

of them with my hammer." He shook his fist angrily. "Blast it all, this is your fault!"

Zanadar peered at the large worthless blade on the ground. "You let them break my sword?" he accused.

"Five armed men sneak into my forge in the dead of the night and try to kill me." Grodek sputtered, "Yes, I *let* them break your sword."

"He didn't use them both at once anyway," Elandar cut in. He poked his staff at one of the bound men on the ground. "My, aren't you an ugly one?"

The big man sighed. "No matter," he said. "The important thing is that you were not seriously hurt. I don't need them both right now, I suppose."

"Told you," Elandar added.

"Spare me the sincerity," the blacksmith responded, "I don't need any more trouble here. Why are they after you?"

Zanadar glanced back at the old man. He was giving him a withering look. "I guess we had better ask one," the big man said, turning back to Grodek.

He walked over to the grimy man who had thrown the knife at him. The man still lay unmoving in the spot he had fallen. His arms and legs had both been tied tightly behind his back. Even if he were conscious, he would not have been able to move.

Zanadar pushed at him with his boot. "Wake up."

The man did not budge. Zanadar sighed and knelt down next to him. "Wake up," he repeated, shaking the man's shoulders. Still, he did not move. The big man mumbled something under his breath and stood up. "He's being difficult."

"So, maybe you should try another one then," Grodek pushed.

Zanadar glared at the smith. "Maybe I will," he shot back.

"Its nice to see that we are not above acting like children," Elandar commented. The two men ignored him.

The big man knelt beside one of the other attackers and shook him by his shoulders, the attacker's dark curly hair flipped about wildly. "You had better wake up," he threatened.

The man groaned and began to squirm. Zanadar dragged him along the floor a few feet and sat him upright against the wooden wall. He was about average height and had a stocky build, short, tangled hair and a mangy black beard. Zanadar knelt down directly in front of the man and leaned in closely. "Open your eyes," he ordered.

The man groaned again and wearily began to open his eyes. They were dark, and very bloodshot. As his vision came into focus, he noticed Zanadar kneeling in front of him. His eyes widened in surprise and he attempted to spring to his feet, managing only to knock himself over as he fought against his bindings. From the floor, he saw the rest of the attackers with their arms and legs tied neatly together and lying about on the hard floor of the smithy. He leaned himself back up against the wall and looked directly at Zanadar.

"What do you want?" he asked, his haggard voice defiant.

The big man laughed. "Funny question for you to be asking me, don't you think?"

"If you were going to kill me you'd have done it already," the man replied, "What do you want?"

"Straight forward enough, I can admire that," Zanadar said pleasantly. He then looked his captive directly in the eye and spoke again, his voice taking a much more serious tone. "Let's start with why you broke into the forge and tried to hurt my friend."

"Grodek is reputed to make quality blades. We came here to rob him. We did not think he'd be here."

The big man nodded. "I see," he said. He stood up and looked down at the man. "Thank you."

The bound man seemed to ease back into the wall as Zanadar walked over to the table. Grodek began to protest.

"What kind interrogation was tha-" the smith was cut off as Zanadar held up a finger and grinned. He picked up a large pair of iron tongs and turned back to the attacker.

"Open your mouth," he said, returning to the man's side.

"Why?" the attacker asked, eyeing the tongs worriedly.

"So I can rip out your tongue. If all you're going to do is lie, you might as well not have it."

A look of panic shot across the bound attacker's face. "I told you the truth. I swear it."

"Then I apologize." Zanadar replied, "Now, open wide." With one large hand, the big man held the attacker's head back against the wall. "This is going to hurt a lot," he said as he slowly lowered the tongs down into the man's mouth. Despite the bound attacker's struggles, he clasped the tongue firmly between the tong's pincers and gave it a sharp tug.

Morgan started to say something, but was hushed by Elandar. The old man gave the ranger an assuring wave and then went back to happily watching Zanadar.

The man's head jarred forward as he screamed. He tried to speak, nearly choking himself in the process. Zanadar removed the tongs from his mouth.

"Did you have something to say?" he asked.

The man cursed. "You're a lunatic!" he yelled.

Zanadar nodded. "Was that it, then?" he asked as he began to lower the tongs back towards the attacker's face.

"Wait!" the man said urgently.

Zanadar raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"All right... we didn't come to rob Grodek."

"You don't say?"

"We were sent for you three," he said, giving the big man an icy stare.

"Us three!" Morgan repeated incredulously. "What did I do?"

The man smirked grimly. "Maybe it's the company you keep, boy."

"Who sent you?" Zanadar asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Grodek slammed his fist on to the table. "What do you mean you *don't know*?" he demanded.

The attacker nodded towards the grimy man on the floor next to him. "He's the one who hired us. If you want to know who ordered it, ask him. I don't ask questions, I just get paid."

Zanadar frowned.

"Maybe you shouldn't have hit that one so hard." Elandar offered.

"You're not really helping, old man," he replied. He looked back to the captive. "How did you know where we'd be?"

"He told us," the bound attacker again looked back towards the man on the floor. "When we met up with him a few hours ago most of us came here, but he sent a few somewhere else. Listen, I was just doing what I was told. He promised we wouldn't have to kill anyone."

"Wouldn't have to kill anyone? Is that why you messed up my forge with all those weapons of yours?" Grodek fumed. "If Zanadar isn't going to do it, I'll rip your tongue out myself." The smith started towards the man.

The big man held up a hand. "One minute, Grodek. Then he's all yours, I promise." He studied the captive for a moment. "You said there were others. Where are they now?"

"They went somewhere else, they won't be coming here."

"You know, you're starting to irritate me." Zanadar grabbed the man's throat and began to squeeze. "Are you going to answer my question or not?"

"The stables," the man coughed, "They went to the stables."

An ill feeling began to creep through Morgan. The color drained from his face. *Renna*. The ranger grabbed his pack from the ground and raced out the broken doorway.

DOORS BEWARE

He vaguely heard someone call out behind him, but ignored it, instead willing himself to run faster.

The predawn streets were for the most part empty, affording Morgan ample space to frantically dig in his pack as he ran through the city. He tried to draw one of the dark steel maces, but it caught sharply on something. He tugged harder and heard a rip as the mace slid free. Morgan flung the pack onto his back and continued to run. Sweat was beginning to appear on his forehead as he drew the second mace out from over his shoulder.

By the time Morgan reached the stables the muscles in his legs burned painfully. The main doors were closed, as they should be at this time of the morning. The building sat quietly in the darkness. From the outside, it looked to be undisturbed.

Morgan breathed heavily and carefully tested the main door. Locked. He put his ear to the wooden wall and listened. He could hear some faint shuffling from inside, but nothing else. He stepped softly in the loose dirt that ran along the side of the building, cautiously making his way along the outer wall until he had circled around to the back end of the stables.

The rear entrance hung opened widely. The faint light that should be spilling out behind the building was absent. He steadied his breath and slowly crept towards the door. As he neared the entrance Morgan could hear the shuffling, it was much clearer now.

He edged closer, and peered around the door. It was dark inside. He could make out the edges of two rows of stalls and not much more. Moving guardedly, Morgan stepped inside. Many of the horses treaded about nervously, peering wide-eyed into the darkness, their hooves making the rough shuffling sound as they crunched the dry hay beneath them.

Morgan heard a sound. His head shot up as he tried to pinpoint the source. It had come from somewhere near the center of the building. It sounded like a person. He pushed farther into the stables, keeping close to the wooden walls. He stayed below the heads of the horses, so as to not spook them and draw unwanted attention to his presence. Just ahead of him, one of the stall doors hung open.

The ranger paused for a moment, silently debating the best course of action. If there were more of those men in here, he may not be able to scare

them all off. For that matter, he now stood alone more or less directly at the center of the stables. Suddenly he felt a bit foolish. It was too late to turn back now. He frowned inwardly and slowly poked his head around the corner.

A dark shape lay in a heap in the middle of the stall. Morgan strained to make out any detail in the darkness. It was a body. Something was protruding from its back. A hilt, from a small blade or dagger, maybe. His heart sank. They had already been here. He was too late.

The ranger forced his eyes from the body and continued to scan the stall. A small wooden stool rested on its side on the dirt floor against the wall, it looked to have been kicked over. It was Renna's. The slender girl sometimes had trouble grooming the heads of the taller horses on her own.

Then he heard the noise again, a whimper. It came from the back of the dark stall. It was definitely a person. He listened closer. He could distinctly hear breathing. It was uneven though and erratic.

"Renna?" Morgan whispered.

He heard the girl's breath catch, and a startled rustling.

"Renna?" he whispered again, more anxiously this time. "Are you all right?"

There was a pause.

"Morgan... is that you?" he heard her voice whisper back.

He rushed into the stall, nearly tripping over the body in the center. Renna sat huddled up in the back corner. Her legs were pulled closely and tucked beneath her arms. The girl's small frame was trembling. Tears rolled down her face.

"It's me," Morgan replied, "Are you hurt?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but could only manage to stare at the dead man. Morgan moved to block her view of the body. His foot crunched loudly on some hay. He glanced nervously over his shoulder and out into the darkened stables.

"Are you hurt?" he repeated hurriedly.

She shook her head meekly.

"Can you walk? We need to get out of here."

Renna wiped at her eyes and sniffed. "I think so," she said quietly. She took Morgan's hand and slowly pulled herself to her feet. She glanced down at the man lying on the ground. Immediately tears began to well up in her eyes once more.

"Don't look at it," Morgan said gently as he guided her past the body. He poked his head out of the stall and looked both ways. Even with the faint light leaking in through the back entrance, the building was still dark. He did not see anything, though it did little to assure him that no one was there.

The ranger cautiously led Renna out into the center of the stables. Staying close to the wooden stall doors, they began to creep back towards the rear entrance. The young stable hand stumbled lightly a few times, but caught herself. As they neared the back door, a loud shout rang out from just outside the main entrance. It was deep and barbaric sounding.

"Go! Quickly!" Morgan exclaimed urgently, dropping the whisper. But before either of them had the chance to reach the back, the front doors were blast open. The lock was blown off and shot forward into the stables several paces. A resounding clap echoed through the building as the main doors smacked violently against the front wall. Their hinges screamed in protest, but held. Renna gripped Morgan's arm tightly.

The moon's dim light poured into the stables, illuminating the inside of the building with a soft, pale glow. Several horses reared up in their stalls and cried out, spooked by the sudden disturbance. Morgan tightened his grip on his maces and whirled around to face the entrance, ready to fight.

Zanadar stood planted in the doorway. The big man's armor glistened casually in the moonlight. He held his large sword at his side and gazed into the room with an icy glare. Elandar stood behind him. The old man looked into the stables for a moment then turned up his nose.

"Where are all the thugs?" he asked impatiently.

Zanadar lowered his sword. "I don't see any," he said, his voice somewhat disappointed. The big man spotted Morgan and Renna near the back entrance. "That was a brilliant idea running off like that alone, by the way," he added.

Morgan exhaled slowly and eased back on his maces, though Renna still held his arm tightly. Zanadar and the old man entered the building. "We didn't miss all the fun did we?" the big man asked. As he passed, he glanced into the stall Renna had been hiding in. "Oh," he said soberly. "Are you two all right?"

"We're fine," Morgan answered.

"Did you do that?"

Morgan shook his head.

"You?" he pointed towards Renna.

She nodded slowly.

Zanadar studied the girl for a moment. "I see," he said. "Was he alone or were there more?"

"There were more," she sniffed. "And they may be coming back, we should go."

Zanadar patted his sword. "Let them come back. So, what exactly happened?"

"I was here getting your stupid horses ready when I thought I heard someone at the main door. It was locked though," she paused to wipe her dark eyes, "and we are never opened this early so I ignored it. But when I came in I left the back unlocked, I closed it, but that didn't stop them. I heard them come in, at first I thought it was you three until I turned around..." she trailed off.

"And then what?" the big man asked.

"They came after me. I ran into one of the stalls and climbed up into the roof," she pointed upwards, "They couldn't get up after me so they left. I stayed up there for a while, incase they were just waiting for me to come down. Then two came back, I tried to stay hidden but it did not take them very long to find me.

"One said that if I didn't come down he was going to start killing the horses. He didn't know I had a knife though. I didn't want to kill him," she looked up at the big man, trying to hold back tears, "...I had no choice."

Zanadar shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned he got off easy. What about the other?"

"I cut him across the face when I jumped down. I think I may have gotten one of his eyes, because he ran as soon as I stabbed his friend." Her face took on a frightened look, "He said he was going to come back and find me. We need to go."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Zanadar said, "If they come back we'll be able to handle them. Did they say anything else?"

Renna stared coldly at the big man through her teary eyes. "They said a lot of other things. I killed one of their friends. I know their type. They are going to come back for me, only next time it's not going to be just one man. How long did you plan on staying?"

"They weren't here for you," the big man stated.

"What are you talking about?"

Morgan cut in. "We came from a forge near the other side of the city. When we got there, a group of men was waiting for us. Fortunately, I think they underestimated what Zanadar was capable of. In any event," the ranger continued, "one of them told us there'd be men waiting here too."

"Are they the reason you're leaving the city?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, Adlus is sending us to Rindol Field to check on something. He doesn't seem to think its anything serious though. We should only be gone for a week or so, you can come with us if you'd like. By the time we get back the guard should have rounded up all the rest of those men."

"Absolutely not." Zanadar said stiffly.

"What?" the ranger asked, turning towards the big man.

He pulled Morgan aside a few steps. "She can't come," he said.

"Why not?"

"No other people, just the three of us."

"Can't you see how scared she is?" Morgan whispered harshly.

"...and don't think I'm not sensitive to that Morgan, but--"

"But what?" Morgan said, becoming a little annoyed. "If Elandar isn't going to hinder us than neither will Renna. Listen, I've been pretty appeasing to this point. First, you bring Elandar along and I *know* Adlus wouldn't be happy about that if he found out. Then, someone looking for *you* tries to kill me. Maybe that's a common thing for you, but nobody has ever tried to murder me before. As if that weren't enough then they try to hurt Renna... and she had to *kill* one of them - all the while with not so much as an explanation from you. No, we are not going to just leave her here, you might, but I won't."

The big man gave Morgan a look that suddenly made him feel a bit less sure of himself then glanced back to Renna.

"Fine," he said loud enough for everyone to hear. "Are the horses ready?"

Renna nodded. Morgan straightened himself, he was a little surprised the big man had actually changed his mind.

"Good, then let's go."

A faint smile touched Renna's tear-streaked face. "Thank you," she said softly to Morgan.

Elandar scratched his head and looked up into the wooden beams supporting the roof. "How did you get up there?"

She pointed towards one of the larger horses, a foul looking, dirt colored gelding. "His name is Grayus, I climbed up his back. He doesn't let anyone else near him."

"If I were in his condition I probably wouldn't have the best disposition either," the big man said sourly.

"You don't have the best disposition," Elandar pointed out.

"Which one is mine?" Zanadar asked shortly.

Renna pointed to a large black horse in one of the stalls near the back. "That one," she said.

The big man grabbed his saddlebags off the ground and stomped off towards the animal.

"That back door looks to still be rather unsmashed," Elandar called out behind him, "Please try to resist any urges you may have to break it."

THEY JUST LIKE TO TALK

It did not take long for the three men to prepare their mounts. Morgan filled Renna in on the morning's events as he strapped his packs to the horse she had selected for him. The stable hand gasped audibly several times while he described the encounter at Grodek's smithy.

"And you still don't know why they attacked you?" she asked quietly. She glanced over towards Zanadar and the old man. They were at the other end of the stables speaking in hushed tones.

From what Morgan could tell, the big man did not appear to be happy. Though he could not hear exactly what was being said, Zanadar was far from being the only one who was upset. Morgan let his gaze shift back to Renna. She had stopped crying, but was still visibly shaken. The ranger was angry. At whom precisely, he did not know, but angry nonetheless.

He was frustrated because he knew the big man was not being entirely up front with him, he was mad because he had been attacked and did not know why, and he was furious that Renna could have been killed and he still did not know to what purpose.

"No, I don't have any idea," Morgan answered calmly. "Believe me, I'm just as eager as you to get out of the city and let the guards round them up."

"And you're sure they'll be able to do that?" Renna pushed.

"I have a feeling we left most of them tied up back at Grodek's," he smiled assuredly, "I'm sure the guard can persuade at least one of them to talk."

"I hope so," she replied softly. She glanced back at the stall, now closed, that Morgan had found her in, her dark, brown eyes betraying her worry.

"You were defending yourself, Renna," Morgan said, "You had no choice."

"I know," she said, her gaze still on the stall.

"Are you two about ready?" Zanadar said, as he walked over from the other side of the building. He appeared to have calmed down.

"Just about," Morgan answered. He turned to Renna, "Was there anything you wanted to bring?"

The stable hand shrugged. "I don't really have anything."

"There's nothing wrong with traveling light," stated Zanadar. "Let's get going then," he said as he started back towards his horse.

"Don't worry, I have plenty of gear," Morgan said to Renna as he climbed onto his steed, "we can share."

She smiled lightly. "Thanks."

"Which horse are you taking?"

Renna nodded her head towards Gray. "I might as well take him," she said, "Nobody else will ride him while I'm gone." She walked over to the cranky gelding and patted his head affectionately. "Besides," she said as she leapt up into the saddle, "He's a good horse, whether he wants to admit it or not."

The two guided their mounts from their stalls and slowly rode to the back of the stables where Zanadar and the old man were waiting for them.

Morgan gestured towards the stall where the attacker's body lay. "Shouldn't we... do something about that before we go?" he asked.

"Grodek has probably already contacted the guard," Zanadar answered, "They will undoubtedly be here before long, I'd just assume be long gone once they do arrive."

"Don't you think that looks a bit suspicious?" Renna said.

The big man shrugged. "We didn't do anything wrong, why care how it looks? We can explain when we get back, but for now we need to get moving."

Elandar raised his hand dramatically, nearly knocking the hat off his head. "The journey begins!" he declared.

Zanadar shook his head. "You better not do that the whole time."

"I will do whatever strikes my fancy," he said defiantly.

Renna gazed at Morgan with a questioning look.

"I'm assuming you get used to it," the ranger explained, he then shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Still waiting, though."

The stable hand actually managed a bit of a laugh.

"Let's go," Zanadar said with a wry grin.

The stables were close to the west entrance to the city, and within a matter of moments, the four had reached the gate. The sun was only minutes away from peaking over the horizon, and already a steady stream of people were arriving and departing the city.

Several uniformed city guards briefly questioned each person to pass through the gates before waving them onward. Morgan knew that there were also a number of guards in plain workmen's clothing observing the area. Security was something taken very seriously in New Targonor. Should any sign of the undead that had claimed the southern half of Thestra ever reach the city, the entire army of Targonor would be called to duty and mobilized within a matter of days.

After a short wait in line, an imposing looking guard waved the group to the gate.

"What is your purpose for leaving the city?" he asked politely.

"Ranger business," Morgan replied, showing the guard Adlus' seal.

"Four of you? Those two don't look like rangers to me," the guard said as he looked to Elandar and Renna.

Morgan pointed to Zanadar. "He's not either. It's a long story. We're leaving for Rindol Field. We expect to be gone for about a week."

The guard nodded. "Very well then," he said, waving them through the gate, "Travel safely."

"Thank you," the ranger replied.

Outside the city, a well constructed cobblestone road lead from the gate to a small bridge, which spanned a narrow crevice leading out to the sea. The crevice was deep, and was where the Weatherfall River met with the ocean that dominated New Targonor's northern horizon. With each wave, seawater swept in and crashed alongside its walls, sending a wet spray upwards.

They rode across the bridge, which had little traffic at this early hour and stopped to survey their surroundings. To the west, rolling green hills sprawled for as far as Morgan could see in the morning light. To the east, back across the Weatherfall River the northern plains stretched out of view.

"That was impressive," the big man said after a few moments.

"What was?" Morgan asked.

"The way you handled that guard."

"I told him the truth," Morgan said, confused.

"Exactly," Zanadar replied, "Most people leaving a dead body behind them tend to lie."

Morgan shrugged, "We didn't do anything wrong. You said it yourself."

"That is true."

"I hate to interrupt," Elandar said in a tone that suggested that he did not at all, in fact, hate to interrupt, "But we are going to be traveling sometime today, correct?"

"We can just head southwest until we hit Tursh," Morgan replied, "From there we can take the road to Rindol Field unless you know a quicker way, I haven't been down there very many times."

Zanadar leaned back in his saddle. "The road will do fine. I'm surprised you haven't been down there much before."

"My post is near Leth Nurae," Morgan explained as they began to ride. "I've never really had much of a reason to go to Rindol Field before."

For several hours, the party rode southwest, climbing and descending the lush green hills of the Thestran countryside. It was a bright day. Only a few

puffy white clouds lingered in the rich blue sky, slowly nudged onward by a peaceful breeze.

As they crested one particularly tall hill, the village of Tursh gradually became visible. Morgan knew that from this vantage point the village appeared closer than it actually was, but that even so, they were not very far away.

"Morgan..." Renna said. "Are we stopping in Tursh?"

He thought for a moment. "As much as I'd like to, I can't really think of a reason. It will only be around midday by the time we get there so we couldn't spend the night." The ranger frowned and let out a brief sigh. "No, we'll just go around."

"I see."

"Would you rather if we dropped you off in Tursh and picked you up on our way back to the city?" Morgan asked, guessing as to the meaning of her question.

"No," Renna replied quickly, "That's not why I was asking."

"Why go around?" Zanadar asked.

"Experience," Morgan said, "Every time I've tried to go through I always get stopped by someone. Tursh is not a large village and I have spent most of my life there. Whenever I come through people always want to talk."

"Well it isn't everyday their poor muddy village gets to be blessed by the likes of the all powerful tenderfoot Morgan," Elandar said sardonically, "I am sure it's a big deal for them."

"That wasn't how I meant it," the ranger said defensively, "What I mean is, all my mother's old friends always want to talk. They're dear old women and I like them all very much, but we don't really have time for that."

A grin cracked Renna's somber face. "They still bother you all the time?" she asked, sounding amused.

"They're not a bother, they just like to talk."

"You're allowed to say they annoy you, Morgan," Renna said. She narrowed her dark brown eyes and flashed a dangerous grin. "I promise I won't tell."

"I think I'm missing something," Zanadar said in a puzzled voice.

"You see, after Morgan's parents..." the girl began to explain, she stopped abruptly though and looked towards the ranger. "Sorry," she apologized.

"Its fine," he said with a dismissive wave. "It happened whether we talk about it or not."

"...After Morgan's parents passed," Renna continued, "His mother's friends sort of adopted him and Gillian. He was mothered constantly by about five old women with absolutely nothing better to be doing. Gillian took to them immediately, of course, but they made Morgan uncomfortable, I think. If you hadn't noticed, he gets a bit fidgety when he's the center of attention." She shot him a suggestive look.

Morgan frowned and made a conscious effort to avoid squirming in his saddle. He was happy to see Renna cheering up, he had been worried about her earlier but at the same time he did not particularly want to encourage her.

"If you ask me, they're the real reason you joined the rangers so young," she said.

"It sounds as if Renna has you just about figured out," Zanadar observed casually.

"They are wonderful women and I owe each of them more than I will ever be able to repay, we really just don't have the time right now," Morgan insisted, "they'd want to know why I had to leave so abruptly the other day and where we're going and whether or not it was dangerous." He sighed. "They just worry, is all. They don't bother me."

"That's an awful lot of explaining if they don't bother you," Renna teased.

Elandar's bushy white eyebrows peaked up. "Five wonderful women with nothing better to do than lavish us with attention." He straightened himself and ran his fingers through his stringy old beard. "Maybe we should stop in Tursh."

Morgan sagged his shoulders, accepting defeat.

"It's all right Morgan," Zanadar said in a comforting tone, "Going around is fine. The quicker we can get to Rindol Field the better, we do not need anything slowing us down and I applaud your efforts to keep on us on track."

"Thank you," the ranger replied.

"Besides," the big man added smugly, "I don't like old women either."

RINDOL FIELD

They continued on for several more hours, winding between hills and through small valleys. The sun passed above overhead as the party made their way around the outskirts of Tursh. They passed the occasional grazing cow in the tall, sweeping grass but managed to avoid any other contact with the village. Morgan looked back over his shoulder regretfully as the small farming community began to fade from sight.

"Don't worry," Zanadar said, noticing the ranger's look, "You'll get to go back soon enough."

Morgan managed to force a weak smile and nod. He knew the big man was only trying to comfort him, and that it would in fact be quite a long time before he had the opportunity to go home again.

They rejoined the road a short distance south of Tursh. It would lead them directly to the home of the Halflings. While Morgan was growing up, Halflings frequently stopping in Tursh on their way to New Targonor with wagonfulls of goods. He had been taken to their village on occasion, but was young and could recall very little. Morgan was somewhat curious to see it for himself now that he was older. The more he thought about it, the sillier it seemed that he'd lived so close for so long yet had never gone and it was only now, that he spent most of his time much farther away that he had occasion to go there.

By the time the first of the small earthen roofs of Rindol Field became visible it was already mid-afternoon. They had traveled quickly and made very good time. Though with the exception of Gray, who looked to be perfectly fine, the horses were beginning to show fatigue.

"You know, I haven't been here since I was a small child." Renna pointed out as they neared the village.

"And now you get to see it as a fully grown child," Elandar cracked. Renna rolled her eyes and ignored the old man.

"It's a nice enough place," Zanadar replied, "Their ale is a little too sweet for my tastes though. What they need is a nice, dark, thick groggy mead."

"I happen to like sweet ale," the stable hand said winsomely.

"How much could you possibly know about beer?" Elandar quipped, his wrinkled face distorted into a frown.

"Enough." Renna answered guardedly.

"Really?" the old man pressed, unconvinced. She looked to Morgan for help. He raised his hands defensively.

"Don't bring me in to this," the ranger said, "I'm a little curious as to where this knowledge comes from myself." A mischievous grin crept over Renna's face. She started to say something, but Morgan cut her short. "You know," he added quickly, "On second thought I'd really rather not know at all."

"Probably a wise decision," Zanadar laughed. The stable hand narrowed her eyes and glared sternly at Morgan as they rode into the village.

Rindol Field, home of the Halflings, was an amicable little community. It was a stable, peaceful place that revolved around a strong sense of kinship and camaraderie. Vibrant green hills surrounded the village, creating a pleasant feeling of seclusion. Most of the Halflings were farmers by trade, and the quiet existence suited them well.

A single, worn road split Rindol Field. It worked its way in from the hills to the north and continued all the way to the very end of the village. On either side of it, small cottages and buildings were placed comfortably apart from one another. They were stout structures, with low earthen roofs and wide doors. Several young Halfling children raced back and forth across the road, darting between a handful of produce carts. They paused briefly to give an appraising look at the group, paying particular attention to Zanadar.

The big man flashed a friendly smile at the children from atop his horse. One of them yelped out loudly and they quickly scattered.

"Well done." Elandar said sardonically.

Zanadar frowned. "Children usually like me," the big man moped lamely. "It must have been your fault."

Before the old man had the chance to protest, Morgan spoke up. "I guess we're looking for the Mayor then." He gazed down the road. Compared to the buzzing streets of New Targonor the village felt almost deserted. What residents were out on the main road cheerfully went about their business, loading produce into carts or rolling large barrels down the street, seemingly oblivious to the newcomers. Off the road a bit, several older looking Halfling women stood together in a large garden. They laughed buoyantly with one another as they tended to their plants. "I'd imagine there's a town hall somewhere around here," the ranger observed.

"Sort of," Zanadar replied, "The mayor's home serves as town hall when needed, but from what I understand that isn't very often."

"Do we know the Mayor's name?" Renna asked.

"Dorbin," Zanadar said looking back to the girl. "Dorbin Gamstell. We should probably find a stable for the horses first though."

"Good idea," Morgan replied. He hopped down off of his horse and looked over towards the small group of children who had cautiously begun to gather together again. They eyed the group curiously. "Hi there," he said with a smile, "Do any of you happen to know where my friends and I could find the stables?"

One of the smaller children, a young, fair-haired boy, let out a frightened squeal, and the group once again scattered off into all directions. The big man laughed deeply as Morgan looked about with a confused expression. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"I told you it wasn't me," Zanadar said to the old man as the rest of them slid off their horses.

"It was all of you," Renna chimed in knowingly.

Elandar peered back at the dark haired girl. "What?" he asked irritably.

"It's all of all of you," she explained in a pleasant tone. She looked to the big man. "You're wearing armor and a sword bigger than they are." She grinned and shifted her gaze to Morgan. "You, as adorable as you are, look like you

haven't had a full night's rest ages. And you..." she said, turning towards Elandar, "Well... you're...*you*."

The three men stood silently for a moment, glancing dubiously at one another. Elandar arched an eyebrow back at the stable hand. "And I suppose you could do better?" he challenged.

Renna nodded. "Oh yes, much," she said seriously.

The old man gestured at the small Halfling child who had squealed. He was peeking his head out from behind a large rock a short distance off, trying to remain inconspicuous while staring wide eyed at the party. Upon realizing that he had been discovered, the fair-haired boy let out a startled gasp and leapt back into hiding.

"I hope you're ready to learn something," Renna said casually as she strolled over towards the large stone. When she got there, rather than going behind it she instead took a seat on the rock, her back to where the small child lay hidden.

She said something that Morgan could not quite make out and leaned back on the stone a bit, as if trying to find a comfortable spot. Then, after a few moments, slowly crawling along the ground on all fours, the fair-haired Halfling boy began to creep out from behind the rock. Cautiously at first, though he quickly became bolder. He looked up towards where Renna sat pretending not to notice him and grinned wickedly. Summoning up all his courage, the boy suddenly leapt to his feet, arms high in the air, and roared as fiercely as a small Halfling boy can roar.

The stable hand jumped back in mock surprise, nearly falling off the stone and held up her hands, as if to surrender. The victory was short lived though, as the boy was quickly overtaken by a relentless wave of giggles. Renna lowered her hands and began to laugh with him. She slid off the rock and sat down on the ground next to the boy, smiling warmly. They talked for a short while, Renna making exaggerated expressions and twice falling over, much to the delight of the young Halfling. Finally, after a quick session of furious tickling Renna gave the boy a brief hug and stood up. He waved fondly, and then ran off to go find his friends.

The stable hand walked back to the group, smiling broadly. "Apparently," she said, rejoining them, "the stables are right next to the tavern, which is just down this road a ways and then to the right. He says they will keep our horses

for as long as we'd like and they will treat them very well. Apparently," she added, "one of his friends' uncle works there. How about that?"

"Was that all?" Elandar grumbled.

"Oh, and he has a kitten named Apple." She wrinkled her nose. "That's kind of an odd name for a cat, but I guess it likes apples," she said with a shrug. Renna then noticed the look the three men were giving her and grinned. "Don't let it get to you. It's not your fault you're all the same," she said in a consoling tone.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Zanadar asked pointedly.

"Boys..." she said rolling her eyes. "You may be bigger, stronger and smell worse but inside you're just the same as that child." She glanced at the ranger. "You can be lead around by the nose and be perfectly fine with it as long as you think you're the one in charge." She smiled. "But its okay, I forgive you."

Morgan wisely chose to stay quiet. He followed along silently while Renna and the old man bickered. As they made their way to the stables, leading their horses down the road, many of the village's residents began to take notice of their presence. They stood alongside the road or appeared in doorways to offer welcoming smiles or friendly waves.

"You'd think they were expecting us," Morgan observed.

"They probably were," Zanadar replied. The big man was right. The ranger had almost forgotten why they were here. They probably were expecting them.

"Well whatever the trouble is, it can't have them too afraid or they wouldn't be letting their children run around outside still."

"Good observation Morgan" the big man said. "I'm getting a little curious to find out what is bothering them, myself."

"I'm more curious to find out if they've finally got something good to drink around here," Elandar stated hopefully.

"Forget it, old man." Zanadar responded sternly. "Business first."

"That's right," Renna said with a mocking nod, "Business first."

It took only a few minutes to reach their destination and they quickly stabled their horses. By the time they reached the mayor's home though, it was nearly dark. The building was near the center of the village and was larger than most in town, but was constructed in the same fashion. The windows were all closed and there did not appear to be any light coming from inside the house.

"That doesn't look very promising," Morgan said as they approached the wide wooden door. He knocked. There was no answer.

"Well it isn't a big village," Zanadar said, "I'm sure he's around here somewhere."

Just then, a woman's voice called out from behind him. "Are you looking for the mayor?" Morgan turned around to see a Halfling woman standing in the doorway of a small home on the other side of the road. He squinted, trying to get a better look. She appeared to be young for a Halfling, and stood halfway out onto a small wooden porch.

"Yes we are," the ranger called back. "Has he gone for the night?"

The woman chuckled briefly. "You could say that. He's gone to the tavern. If he's not at home, you can usually find him there. You're the ones from the city, yes?"

"That we are, my lady," Zanadar chimed in.

"I thought so. Thank you for coming," she said. She then waved and turned back into her home. "You all have a pleasant evening"

"See," Elandar said, rubbing his bony old hands together, "I told you we should have gone to the tavern first."

Several minutes later, the party was once again just outside the tavern. Along with the stables, it had a higher roof than most of the buildings in Rindol Field, most likely to accommodate taller visitors to the village. Morgan was thankful for that, and was sure the big man was too.

He could hear music and laughter coming from inside the building. As Zanadar opened the door, he expected to be blasted with the same stench of sweat and watered down beer that the tavern back in New Targonor reeked of. He was surprised though to be surrounded by the pleasant aroma of a

fresh oaken fire. It conjured up images of being back in Tursh. He much preferred that.

The inside of the tavern was remarkably clean. Halflings, both young and old filled the building, sitting around tables and lining the walls. The fireplace was along the far wall and three Halflings sat next to it on small stools whistling out playful melodies on simple wooden pipes.

A stout, rather chubby Halfling came rushing up towards the entrance. He looked to be middle aged, and had thin brown hair that was beginning to bald. He was wearing a spotless wool shirt and a pair of finely stitched work pants. In one hand, the Halfling held a sticky looking pastry and in the other a large tankard. "You must be the rangers from New Targonor," he exclaimed cheerfully. "Welcome to our village! I'm Dorbin Gamstell," the mayor said, introducing himself. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Our pleasure," Morgan responded politely. "My name is Morgan Derek, and these are my friends, Zanadar, Elandar and Renna," he said, gesturing towards each of them.

"A pleasure to meet you all," Dorbin said kindly.

"So," Zanadar asked, "What seems to be the problem?"

NOT SO MIGHTY NOW

"Well..." Dorbin began expansively. He then stopped abruptly and gave the party an embarrassed look. "Where are my manners?" he asked, "Please, come sit down."

The Mayor ushered the group to a large table near the rear of the tavern. At it, two more Halflings sat on high stools. They each appeared to be roughly the same age as the Mayor. They raised their mugs and greeted the party with friendly smiles.

"These are my cousins, Nelton and Reinor," Dorbin said, "They help me keep everything organized. Nelton oversees all of our finances and trade matters and Reinor is our chief envoy. I don't know what I would do without them."

"You would do about a third as much," Reinor teased. The Mayor's cousin had a stocky build and like the Mayor, thinning brown hair. He wore a fine

white shirt underneath a buttoned surcoat and a pair of well made brown pants.

Dorbin's brow arched into a good-natured frown, and then softened. "It's true I'm afraid," he conceded as the group sat down around the table.

Nelton turned towards the party. A sly twinkle beamed from his chestnut colored eyes giving his face a youthful appearance, despite the wrinkles beginning to appear. His hair was lighter than Reinor's and he was a bit thinner. "Don't let Dorbin trick you into thinking he doesn't do anything," he said jovially while rolling up the sleeves on his patched tunic, "As much as he would have you believe otherwise, he is the one who keeps Rindol Field intact."

The Mayor finished his pastry and shrugged. "It isn't hard to stay on the right path when you were placed on it from the start," he said, licking his fingers. "But we're getting off track, I apologize."

"I would not have requested the rangers' assistance had I the means of dealing with this problem myself," he began, "but with all those dang blasted ants in these parts lately I simply don't have the resources to deal with it. You should see those things," he paused briefly, "The ants, I mean. Just last week I saw one nearly as large as me! Fortunately, they only seem to be interested in our crops unless provoked, but I'll feel much better once we are able to get rid of them."

"So the ants are not the problem then?" Zanadar asked.

"Oh they're a problem all right," Nelton said seriously, "But not the reason we sent for you."

Dorbin nodded. "Rindol Field is a peaceful place, we aren't accustomed to trouble, but the ants are more of a nuisance than anything. A very large crop destroying dangerous nuisance, mind you, but one I think we are capable of handling," he said, "No, we called for you because of another matter entirely.

"About three weeks ago now," the Mayor continued, "One of Jon Harkin's-

"-Jon is a local farmer," Reinor interjected.

Dorbin grinned a bit sheepishly. "Sorry," he apologized, "I tend to get a little ahead of myself."

"Its quite all right," the big man replied patiently, "Go on."

"A few weeks ago, a few of Jon's pigs turned up dead. At first, I figured the blasted ants had just gotten sick of swiping our crops. But then he showed me the pigs..."

"What happened to them?" Morgan asked.

"You tell them, Nelton," Dorbin responded with a shiver, "You saw them too."

The Mayor's cousin grimaced and shook his head. "It was not pleasant, to say the least," he said, "They had been torn apart pretty thoroughly. We found pieces of them littered about Jon's entire field."

Renna brought a hand up to her mouth. "That is horrible."

Nelton nodded sadly and set his mug down. "They were the friendliest bunch of pigs I've ever seen too."

"So how do you know it wasn't the ants though?" Morgan said.

"Well, a few reasons," Dorbin explained, "When they decide they fancy something they never leave pieces laying all about. They take every little bit back to their holes. As much as I don't like those pests, one thing they most certainly are not is wasteful." The Mayor took on a thoughtful expression. "Then we started to find ants in conditions similar to the pigs, and I've never seen them fight one another before. I don't think that they do."

"Besides," Nelton added, "I'm not sure they would even be capable of doing something like that. They were not clean wounds. Whatever did that used brute force."

"So then what happened?" Zanadar pressed.

"Well like I said," the Mayor replied, "At first I thought it was the ants, but we ruled that out. Then I figured Jon's son, Durton was involved."

"He's not a bad boy," Reinor offered, "He just seems to have a knack for finding trouble."

Dorbin nodded in agreement. "And it isn't uncommon that he disappears for a few days only to turn up again after something suspicious has happened."

"However," Nelton chattered on, "Durton assures us he had nothing to do with it. And as easy as it would have been to just blame the boy, I believe him. It just doesn't seem like something he would do. Its true, he does get into a good deal of trouble, but it's always he just pilfered this or swiped that. He's never really hurt anything before."

"Nelton is a shrewd one," the Mayor continued, "He can usually tell when someone is trying to pull one over on him. I have to admit though, I wasn't entirely convinced that Durton wasn't involved. I never thought he had done it personally, but he's got friends from the city who come down here every now and then." Dorbin's eyes narrowed slightly. "Very shady friends."

Zanadar blinked wearily. "But you don't think it was his friends?" he asked.

"Well I did," Dorbin said, "until just last week. It rained one night and the next morning we found some tracks around another torn up ant."

The big man arched an eyebrow, his interest piqued. "What did they look like?"

The Mayor shrugged. "Nothing I've ever seen before." He held his hands out a few feet apart, eyeing them carefully. "They were about this size, I'd say. What do you think Nelton, is that right?"

The other Halfling nodded his agreement. "They were quite large. They certainly were not made by one of us."

Zanadar leaned forward a bit. "Was there anything peculiar you remember about them?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin," Dorbin answered. The big man gave the Halfling a frustrated look. "But we thought you may want to see them so we covered one to keep it safe. We'll take you to see it first thing in the morning," the Mayor said with a grin.

"I think he was about to come right over the table at you," Reinor observed casually to his cousin. Zanadar coughed and tried not to look too guilty.

Over by the fireplace, the three Halfling musicians finished their performance and set their pipes aside. The crowd applauded graciously as the troupe took a bow. Nelton and the Mayor both clapped and shouted their praise.

"Those three always do a terrific job," Dorbin said blithely, looking at the party.

The crowd inside the tavern quieted somewhat and the group continued talking at the table. Dorbin asserted there was no reason to start investigating that night and insisted upon treating the entire party to supper.

Pausing briefly to eat, the Mayor and Nelton shared several long-winded but entertaining anecdotes. Reinor remained quiet for the most part, occasionally tossing in his own somewhat sardonic perspective. The crowd in the building seemed only to grow after the meal. Morgan found himself having a good time.

A short while later, Nelton peered through the crowd at a small group of children who sat near where the musicians had been performing earlier. They kept shooting curious looks towards the table and giggling amongst one another whenever they caught one of the group's gaze. Morgan turned around in time to see one of the older children approaching where they sat, her friends watching intently from behind. The ranger recognized a few of them from when they had arrived in the village earlier.

Nelton grinned at his cousin. "I think you're going to get a request for another story," he said to the Mayor.

"I've been telling the children stories after dinner lately," Dorbin explained, "I think they've come to expect it." He chuckled softly for a moment. "I don't know that many more to tell though," he said.

"Mayor Gamstell..." the young girl said as she reached the table. She looked up at Dorbin with big brown eyes. Dorbin melted almost instantly.

"See what they do?" he accused, "They know I don't stand a chance. They're really quite devious."

"Mayor Gamstell, will you tell us a story?" the girl asked hopefully, "...please?"

He smiled back down at the child. "Well now," Dorbin replied in a serious tone, "What kind of story are you interested in hearing?"

She thought for a moment, pondering what was to her a very serious issue. After a moment, she looked back up. "A story about magic," she said decisively.

"A story about magic," the Mayor repeated to himself, thinking, "I'm not sure if I know any of those. I know lots of stories about farmers."

"It just so happens I know somebody who can probably tell a few stories about magic," Zanadar cut in. He gestured towards where Elandar sat. The old man though, appeared to have fallen asleep in his chair, his head tilted back slightly and the mug in his hand hovered dangerously close to slipping free from his grip and spilling onto the floor.

Morgan tugged politely on the sleeve of Elandar's robes. The old man snorted and pulled away. Zanadar leaned over and poked him sharply in the ribs. Elandar spat out briefly as his eyes shot open. Straightening himself, he scowled at the big man. "What?" he asked crankily. "Did those three finally get to the point about the pigs?"

"Sort of," Zanadar said, flashing a quick grin at the Mayor. "But we have a request for a story about magic." He gestured towards the group of children back near the fireplace, all anxiously awaiting the old man's answer.

"It seems a wizard as mighty as yourself would know lots of magic stories," Renna offered, smirking.

The young girl's eyes widened in amazement. "You're a wizard?" she asked excitedly.

Elandar shot the big man a dangerous look before turning back to the child. "I happen to be a mighty wizard, young lady," he replied sternly, gripping his worn staff tightly in his bony old hands. He thought for a moment and then narrowed his eyes down at the girl. By this point, much of the tavern was watching the interaction with a keen interest. "I may know one..." he trailed off briefly. The crowd seemed to lean in closer. "But I'm not sure if I remember it all. Perhaps if I had a few more drinks it would help freshen my memory."

Almost instantly, shouts erupted from the patrons and tankards full of sweet ale began to appear on the table at an alarming rate. The young girl

backed up and rejoined her friends seated in front of the fireplace. All eyes were now rested firmly upon the old man, who sat glaring at the collection of mugs on the table before him.

He grumbled bitterly to himself and then leaned back in his chair. "Fine then," Elandar said with a frown, "One story and one story only."

STORYTIME

The group of children cheered gleefully, as the rest of the patrons in the tavern could not help but to smile with excitement. After a moment, the crowd settled into their seats comfortably and focused their attention on the old man.

Elandar eyed the room full of Halflings dubiously. He repositioned his chair and briefly adjusted his robes before sitting down once more. "This particular story," he began abruptly, "happens to be quite old.

"It takes place in a more peaceful time, centuries ago," the old man said dramatically, with a peculiar gleam in his eye. "Before the fall of Targonor, before your village existed, before the taint of the dead had even arrived in our lands.

"Thestra was a much different place then," Elandar explained, his voice changing tone. "There was a culture of learning. Knowledge was more valuable than any lost treasure. And no where was this more the truth, than in Leth Nurae, the majestic city of the elves.

"After what seemed to be an eternity of war and rebuilding, the elves had finally returned to their homes and were free to pursue that which they coveted the most. Ancient knowledge thought forever lost after the breaking," he paused, "began to reemerge.

Morgan smiled quietly to himself. He had heard this story before, many times in fact. It had always been one of his favorites. He glanced at his companions sitting around the table. Zanadar was leaned back in his chair, his large frame barely able to fit on the seat. The big man listened politely. The mayor and his two cousins all gazed at Elandar attentively, excited expressions on their faces.

Equally enthralled was the stable hand, Renna. She sat contentedly, elbows on the table, with her chin resting firmly in her hands. She'd had a long day. They all had. Sleep would come easily tonight. The ranger looked back to

Elandar. Had Morgan not known any better, he almost would have suspected the cranky old man was enjoying himself.

"The greatest mages in all the lands flocked to Leth Nurae, to take part in these exquisite discoveries. But the elves were very protective of their secrets," the old man continued with a shake of his finger, "and so they turned away all but their own.

"For years they continued with their research. Delving continuously deeper, into their long forgotten past. Among them, one in particular stood out. A mage," Elandar said darkly, "and one of considerable power. For it was this mage who made all the most important discoveries and it was this mage who gained all the power with which they came."

"What was his name?" one of the small Halfling children asked.

Elandar drew back sharply as the crowd leaned in. "His name," he said in a whisper, "was Silas Lucertae."

The old man continued on. "Silas was one of the most respected leaders in the elven community. He, for years, unearthed discovery after discovery and gradually began to assume political power within the city. He ignored it for the most part, caring only for his research. Silas spent weeks upon weeks arduously laboring over single passages in ancient tomes, hoping to unlock whatever secrets they may be hiding.

"Then, one night something happened. He found something in one of those passages. Something he had not anticipated. He locked himself away in his home and entered a frenzied study of his new obsession.

"It was not long after," Elandar said quietly, "that he began to summon forth magic not seen in over a millennia. Powerful magic. Though nobody knew to what extent, it changed Silas. He emerged from his study invigorated and began to take notice of the titles and positions that had been bestowed upon him.

"In a small amount of time Silas became the most prominent figure in Leth Nurae. And though he took a keen interest in the running of the city, he seemed distant - aloof. He continued to gain power at an alarming rate. So much, in fact, that many of the other mages began to fear him.

"This was a fact that Silas very much took advantage of, as he bullied and intimidated all those who opposed him. He grew arrogant, and venomous. He

viewed the other mages as beneath him. Powerless magicians, whose purpose was simply to further his own interests. His arrogance grew to contempt, and he guarded the secrets to his power jealously.

“For a while, there was an uneasy understanding among the elves. They feared Silas, but there was nothing they could do to stop him. Until one day, his boldness took him too far. During a dispute with another ranking mage, in a bout of anger, he killed the elf. There were many witnesses and a trial was called almost immediately.

“He was stripped of his authority and forbid from continuing his research. This only angered Silas further though, and he struck out against his peers,” Elandar exclaimed sharply.

The old man went on to describe, at some length, the atrocities which Silas inflicted upon his own people. His voice rose and fell, hardened and softened at all the right moments. The old man was a skilled orator, which for some reason surprised Morgan. He was also most certainly enjoying himself.

Elandar continued with his story, telling of the effort to subdue the rogue elf. Unfortunately, it seemed as if Silas could not be contained. All who rose up against him were beaten back viciously, powerless against his newfound magic.

“Why couldn't they stop him?” a small boy asked at one point.

Elandar raised an eyebrow and peered back at the young halfling. “Because he was too strong. Lucertae, as he was now called, was unrivaled even amongst the most powerful mages.”

“Was he more powerful than you?”

Elandar huffed at that, and leaned back in his chair with an amused expression. He stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment. “He was mighty,” the old man said, “but he was no Elandar.”

Zanadar groaned audibly and rolled his eyes back in his head.

“How did they stop him?” another boy pressed.

“Well if you'd quit asking questions maybe I could get to that,” Elandar scolded. He let his hand fall away from his thick beard and continued. “The elves lived in a constant state of terror. Trying desperately to appease Lucer-

tae, but the more power he gained the more insatiable his lust for destruction became. Any who disturbed his study were slain, and their homes destroyed.

"All those who challenged him were tossed aside, broken, as if they were mere children. Conventional weapons were useless against Lucertae and no mage in Leth Nurae had the power to oppose him. He closed the city, allowing no one to enter or leave. Any who tried were put to death. His evil began to taint the very earth upon which the city sat."

The crowd remained silent as the old man then told of a peculiar stranger who arrived one night, somehow managing to avoid Lucertae's detection. He was adorned in full, dark robes, which masked his features, and spoke with a deep, commanding voice. In the night, he made his way through the city, gathering what few high mages remained alive from wherever they hid.

The small group of wizards, just six men strong marched through the darkness towards the entrance to the city. Led by the mysterious robed man, they began to cast a spell. It was not long before Lucertae stalked into view, eyes blazing.

"What is this?" he demanded. His voice was twisted, and no longer recognizable. "Who dares defy me?"

The six wizards continued their spell, ignoring Lucertae. The air around them began to shimmer and blur. The tainted elf roared furiously and began to cast a spell of his own, but before he could finish the robed man suddenly broke his concentration and looked up sharply, directly at Lucertae. He spoke a word and in an instant, all seven mages vanished.

Elandar paused as the crowd inhaled audibly. He went on to describe the wizards appearing leagues away and the immense magical battle that ensued. This was, of course, the best part of the story and Morgan found himself watching the crowd rather than paying attention to what the old man was saying.

The young children by the fireplace gasped and covered their eyes as Elandar described how Lucertae battled the six mages. The older Halflings all sat still, paying full attention to the old man, occasionally sipping their drinks. They were a good audience, and Elandar surprisingly enough, was a very good storyteller.

With a grand sweeping gesture he brought the tale to a finish. Lucertae was defeated, but at a great cost. Only a single mage from the six survived. He

returned to Leth Nurae, badly injured and incoherent. He lived for a short while, but in the end his wounds proved to be too grave and he passed. The bodies of the other four elves were never recovered, but a tomb was erected in their honor.

“And that,” Elandar said expansively, “is the end.”

The audience applauded the old man loudly for several moments. Elandar bowed his head once and then continued to scowl until everyone had taken their seats. By now, the sun had long since fallen and the crowd started to disperse.

The young boy who had spoken earlier walked up to the table, a curious look on his face. He stopped a few feet shy of the old man and looked up at him politely.

Elandar glanced down at the boy out of the corner of his eye. “What?” he asked.

“What happened to the man in the robes?”

The old man shrugged. “What do you think happened?”

The boy thought hard for a moment. “I think it would be better if he got away,” he replied.

“Then that is how it happened.” Elandar answered. He turned back to his mug and began to take a deep drink.

“I don't know though, the evil wizard was very powerful,” the boy continued, “How much magic did the robed man have?”

Elandar swallowed and turned back to the boy. He looked at him for a moment, and then held his hands several feet apart. “This much.”

“How much magic do you have?” the young halfling asked.

The old man frowned. “Don't you have parents?”

Zanadar grinned and leaned forward. “In other words,” he said, “Less than that.”

REVERSE LOGIC

The party spoke with the mayor and his cousins for a short while longer before deciding to retire for the evening. They would meet Dorbin the following morning at Jon Harkin's farmhouse, which lay a short distance outside the village.

The inn had a few larger rooms upstairs directly above the tavern area. They had been built specifically to accommodate visitors of larger stature, and had a handful of moderately sized beds in each. The innkeeper led Morgan, Zanadar, Renna and the old man to an empty one and thanked Elandar again for his story. The halfling lit a few large candles, which adorned the walls, before bidding them goodnight.

The room, while bigger than most at the inn, was still quite cozy. A small window about midway up the far wall overlooked the back of the building. The wooden floorboards creaked slightly as they walked into the room and the muffled voices of the few patrons who still remained at the tavern below could barely be heard through the thick timber. Morgan was tired though, he knew the soft noise would not bother him at all.

The old man glanced around the room, muttered a few curses under his breath, set his staff against the wall and placed his hat atop it. He then collapsed into bed, falling into a heavy slumber almost immediately. Within minutes, the big man had removed his traveling gear and also lay stretched out, sleeping deeply. Morgan sat on the edge of his bed and took off his boots. He rubbed his eyes wearily and looked towards Elandar. The old wizard was snoring loudly, he sounded oddly content.

Just then, Morgan felt weight on the bed next to him.

"I bet he's doing that on purpose," Renna said quietly, sitting down beside him.

Morgan nodded in agreement. "That would not surprise me at all." He turned towards the stable hand. She was staring at him, a peculiar look in her large brown eyes.

"What?" he asked suspiciously.

She shifted her gaze away from the ranger, eyeing the two occupied beds on the other side of the room. "What are we doing with them?" she asked seriously. "I don't understand anything that has happened today."

Morgan yawned slightly and exhaled. He looked down to his worn backpack, which sat on the floor at the base of the bed. He stared at it for a moment, and then shrugged. "We're here to see what is killing the Halfling's pigs," he said finally.

"And you need them for that?" Renna retorted, unconvinced.

"I don't know why Adlus sent Zanadar along with me... or sent me along with him. Or why Elandar is even here."

"And what about this morning? What was that?"

Morgan could only shake his head. "I don't know," he said helplessly.

"Those men..." she trailed off.

He gave the stable hand a reassuring look. "I don't think that had anything to do with us."

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "*Morgan!*" Renna whispered harshly, her voice catching briefly, "They tried to *kill* us."

"Listen," he said, "All I know is that the worst place to be right now is in New Targonor. We should just stay down here for a little while, find the wolves that are probably killing the pigs and then go back after things have settled down. We don't even have to go back with those two," Morgan added, "We can let them go first and follow later."

"I don't know why what happened this morning happened, Renna, and I don't know what it is they aren't telling us. But what I do know, is that I will not let anyone else try and hurt you, all right?"

She gave the ranger a crooked smile. "You'll protect me from anyone?" she asked with a mock innocence.

Morgan frowned. "Don't push your luck," he said, trying not to sound embarrassed. He hated it when she did that. She *always* did that.

Renna smirked, then stood up and began to walk back towards her bed. She paused after a few steps, and turned.

"Morgan?" she whispered softly.

"Yes?" he said, still frowning.

"Thank you."



As most had recently, morning came sooner than Morgan would have liked. He awoke to a bright ray of sunlight streaming through the window and across his face. He squinted and looked around the room.

Elandar was still sound asleep. Renna sat on her bed, running a simple looking brush through her long dark hair. The big man was nowhere to be seen, his sword and armor noticeably missing.

"You look like you are not ready to wake up yet," the stable hand observed, seeing Morgan look about the room.

"When this is done I am going to sleep for a week," the ranger stated matter-of-factly. Morgan groaned audibly and sat up in bed. He had a sour taste in his mouth and an uncomfortable cramp in his neck. "Where is Zanadar?"

"Downstairs," she answered. "He said to wake Elandar up and come down whenever you are ready."

Morgan stretched his arms out in front of him for a moment, and then yawned expansively.

"You don't look ready," Renna offered.

"I'm fine," the ranger protested. He swung his legs out of bed and stood up gingerly, peering over at the sleeping old man. "This ought to be fun," he said under his breath. He glanced at the dark haired stable hand, "I don't suppose you would like the honors?"

She shook her head and smiled sweetly. "All yours."

"Wonderful," Morgan muttered as he walked over to the other side of the room. He stopped just next to Elandar's bed and leaned in closer, though making a careful effort not to touch the old man.

"Elandar," he said briskly, "We need to go."

He did not move.

Morgan sighed and sagged his shoulders. "Elandar," he repeated, louder this time, "wake up."

Still, there was no response from the old man. The ranger leaned back for a second, thinking. He glanced contemplatively at the old man's staff, which was leaning against the wall next to the bed. He looked back to the sleeping wizard and cautiously began inching his outstretched hand towards it.

Just as the tips of his fingers were about to touch the worn old stave, Elandar's eyes shot open, immediately focusing squarely upon Morgan, with a markedly unfriendly look. The ranger recoiled back, taking his hand away from the staff. He smiled slightly.

"That worked well," Renna called from the other side of the room.

Elandar, still glaring at Morgan, shot the stable hand a quick sidelong glance, his beard twitching slightly. "What worked well?" he asked dubiously.

"We need to go, get up so we can go downstairs," the ranger explained.

The old man narrowed his eyes. "I see," he said coolly. He slowly rose from bed, snatched his hat from its perch and placed it on his head. He turned back to Morgan, his wrinkled purple robes swishing about, staring at him coldly.

"Stay away from my staff," he growled.

A few minutes later the three were coming downstairs to meet Zanadar. When they arrived back at the inn's tavern the big man was sitting at a table, tapping his foot impatiently.

"What were you doing out so early?" Elandar inquired.

"I was just looking around a bit," Zanadar explained.

"Oh?" Morgan said, his interest slightly piqued.

"Yes, we need to go right now."

"Why is that?" Renna asked.

"Because I saw the footprint Dorbin was telling us about."

Morgan tried to search the big man's face for answers. "What did it look like?"

Zanadar leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the table in front of him. "We are not dealing with wolves."

SO MUCH FOR THE WOLVES

Elandar shivered mockingly. "*Oh no!*" he exclaimed. The old man sniffed at the air and glanced around the room. There were a handful of scattered patrons seated sporadically across the tavern, each seemingly content to eat their meals quietly while minding their own business. "I smell something cooking," he observed with a hungry look in his eye, "what's for breakfast?"

Although Morgan was eager to get going, the pleasant aroma of whatever was being prepared back in the kitchen had stirred up his appetite. He put a hand to his stomach. It murmured its agreement.

Zanadar sighed and sagged his shoulders in defeat. "Fine."

The party ate a quick breakfast, with the big man tapping his foot impatiently all throughout and then departed. It was a pleasant morning in Rindol Field. The crisp air was somewhat cold, but the rising sun would quickly remedy that.

Jon Harkin's farm was located on the outskirts of the village. Along the way, they passed many of the townsfolk in the street, most of whom were already hard at work tending to their gardens or carting in produce from the fields. Morgan recognized many of them from the previous night at the tavern. They smiled and waved politely at the group as they passed, before returning to their work.

As the party passed the stables, Renna glanced in their direction, a concerned expression on her face.

"Don't worry, I'm sure they are fine," Morgan said, noticing her look. "If the Halflings are anywhere near as hospitable to them as they are to us, we will probably never convince them to leave."

That seemed to ease the stable hand's worry a bit. She nodded, and then an impish grin spread across her lips. "They're probably having a *wonderful* time with Gray."

They arrived at Jon Harkin's farm a few minutes later. A small house sat along the edge of the property. Behind it, a large field stretched out into the countryside. A worn down looking barn with peeling paint stood a ways beyond the house. Despite its dilapidated appearance, it was quite obviously well built.

"The print is back this way," the big man said, gesturing towards the field. Zanadar lead the group around the side of the farmer's home and back into his neatly planted rows of crops. A variety of vegetables and other plants grew in the field, each given their own large area.

They trudged through countless rows of turnips, radishes and onions, occasionally scaring up a small flock of birds or startling a rabbit out of hiding. Morgan stepped carefully, to avoid damaging any of the knee-high plants.

The ground began to slope downward slightly, and the ranger could see Mayor Gamstell and another halfling, presumably Jon Harkin, perhaps a hundred paces in front of them. They were standing close together and looking at something on the ground.

Dorbin glanced up and noticed them approaching. He waved and gestured towards the ground in front of them.

"Over here," he called out.

"I was beginning to think you had forgotten about us," Jon said to Zanadar as the group reached the two halflings. The farmer appeared to be middle aged. Wrinkles lined his hazel eyes and forehead though his brown hair still maintained most of its youthful color. He was clean shaven, and a bit skinnier than the mayor. He wore simple workman's pants and a loose fitting, knit shirt. He grinned crookedly at the big man.

Zanadar frowned and pointed a stern finger at Elandar. "That one held us up," he accused.

"I wasn't the only one who wanted breakfast," the old man spat back indignantly.

Dorbin let out a deep laugh and clasped his hands together. "Well, we're all here now," he said, "That's what is important." The mayor was dressed much the same as he had been the previous day. He turned towards Morgan and Renna, "It is good to see you two again this morning. I hope you slept well?"

"Very," Renna said pleasantly, "Thank you."

"Well, Zanadar here has already seen it," Jon said as he leaned over and began to pull several plants out of the way so that the others could see, "But here it is."

Morgan looked down into the exposed soil at the print. The big man was right. It was large, much too large to be a wolf. The shape of the print was entirely different from a wolf's as well. It was sunken deep into the dirt and rather than looking like a paw, it instead had a large sole and three thick, oversized and elongated toes.

Renna squinted at the print. "It looks kind of like a big bird."

Morgan knew that it was no bird though. Whatever had made the track was much too large and much too heavy to be just a bird. The ranger placed one boot covered foot next to the print. It was barely as long as one of the toes alone.

"Bears, wolves, deer, badgers... I would know any of those if I saw them," Morgan said, "But I've never seen a track like this before. It walks on two feet, but that's about all I can tell you right now I'm afraid."

Dorbin's face fell somewhat, he looked a bit disappointed. The ranger noticed the mayor's expression and apologized.

"I'm sorry, Mayor Gamstell. I don't know what it is," he looked towards Zanadar. "What about you?"

The big man eyed the three-toed indentation silently for a moment, studying it carefully. "No," he said finally, in a flat voice. "I don't know either."

Renna shot the big man a peculiar look.

"Well some help you two are," Elandar chimed in, waving his staff at Zanadar and Morgan. "It's a good thing we came all this way. I don't know what they would have done without us."

Both Dorbin and Jon laughed at that. "Oh don't you worry about it," Jon said empathetically, "We haven't the slightest idea what it is either, but between us I'll wager we can get to the bottom of it."

Morgan knelt down next to the track and looked at it more closely. "I am assuming it was raining the night this was made?" he said looking up towards the farmer.

Jon nodded. "Indeed it was. There's a few others scattered about but this was the best looking print I could find, so I made sure to take special care of it until you got here, so nothing would ruin it."

"I appreciate that," the ranger responded. "How long ago was it made?"

"This one..." the farmer thought for a moment, "about a week ago. If you look hard enough you can find them all over my field though. Whatever it is has been back as recently as two nights ago. It doesn't seem to ever go up this hill, and I've taken to herding my pigs into the barn at night. It has stayed away so far, but I would rather not give it the opportunity to kill again.

"Even without taking more of my pigs," he added, "it's still doing enough damage to my crops. Whatever it isn't digging up and eating, it's just trampling into the dirt."

"And you've never seen the creature?" Morgan asked.

Jon shook his head. "I'm in my fields nearly the entire day and I've not seen a thing. It comes during the night. I tried sitting on top of the barn after the sun has gone down on several occasions but never have I managed to spot the beast."

"None of us have," the mayor interjected, "It only comes when it's dark and until recently hasn't come very close to the village, so we weren't too worried. But it has been coming farther and farther up this hill. Slowly, yes, but with each visit it ventures closer. That's the reason we decided to send for you. We do not have walls or fortifications, and as you saw yesterday our children are quite fond of playing outside during the day..." he trailed off.

"I understand completely, Mayor Gamstell," Morgan assured the Halfling. He turned towards Jon, "Do you mind if I look around at some of the other tracks?"

"Of course not," the farmer responded, "Do whatever you need to do." He gestured down the hill, "Most of them are down that way, there's a few up here but not many."

"Thank you," the ranger said as he continued further down into the field. The others followed close behind. While descending through the rows of crops Morgan could make out faint impressions of where the animal had stepped. He carefully pushed the farmer's plants aside, spilling the morning dew from their leaves onto the ground, to get a better look. None were nearly as well preserved as the first print. As the ground began to once again level out though the tracks became clearer, and much less difficult to find.

"Why are they so much easier to spot down here?" Renna asked, looking back up the hill to where Dorbin and Jon stood talking to one another.

"Farmer Harkin said it had rained recently, most of the water probably ended up down here and caused there to be quite a bit of mud. It dried, and apparently it has not rained again since, which is fortunate for us," the ranger explained.

"You know Morgan," Zanadar started with a grin, "You're much better at this than I thought you'd be."

"Thank you... I think."

The big man laughed. "Don't worry, it was a compliment."

Elandar poked at one of the footprints with his staff. "Not good enough to know what it is though," he grumbled.

"Well, I can tell you that whatever it is," the ranger said towards the old man, "that there is more than one of them."

Zanadar nodded. "He's right," he pointed towards a group of crushed plants. Their leaves had been stomped into the dirt. Two partially faded sets of tracks ran through them. "Look, they aren't the same size. They're close, but these were definitely made by two different animals."

"So what does that mean?" Renna asked.

The big man shrugged, "Just that there were at least two."

Elandar leaned on his staff and peered to the south, past the edge of the farmland and into the sprawling green fields, which seemed to roll off into the distance forever in the clear morning air. Their tall grass waved gently in the light early breeze. "I don't see anything," he said.

"Well," Zanadar stated, "You *are* quite old, you know."

He glared dubiously at the big man and gripped his staff tightly. "Don't you start with me, meathead, my eyes are just as good as they ever were and you know it."

Zanadar looked amused for a moment, and then narrowed his eyes as he too gazed out into the fields. "As much as I hate to admit it, I don't see anything out there either."

"The tracks clearly came from the south though," Morgan added.

The big man grinned widely, "So I guess we'll be going that way, won't we?"

Elandar grumbled audibly and looked back up the hill towards the village. "*After* we get our horses." Renna seemed to brighten a bit at that.

Morgan and Zanadar exchanged a quick glance and both nodded. "Fair enough," the big man said. "We will be able to cover a lot more ground that way. With any luck we'll be able to catch whatever they are sleeping."

They turned and began to hike carefully back up the hill, the ground was wet and slick still at this early hour.

"Did you find any more tracks?" Dorbin asked as they made their way back up towards the two Halflings.

Morgan nodded to the mayor and explained what they had seen down the hill. "Right now we are headed back to the stables to get our horses then we're going to ride south a ways and see what we can find."

"Oh my," Dorbin responded. "Do be careful." Jon echoed the sentiment. "If you need any supplies see Nelton," the mayor called out as they started back towards the village, "they will be free of charge, of course."

Elandar rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Free of charge," he hummed to himself.

"Don't get any bright ideas." Zanadar scolded. "I sincerely doubt by supplies he meant any sort of ale. Besides, I thought you didn't like Halfling brews."

"They are better than nothing," the old man shot back, as they entered once again into the village.

Renna tugged on Morgan's sleeve and pulled him aside as the other two men argued. "Morgan..." she said quietly.

"What is it?"

"You know when Zanadar said he didn't know what made those tracks?" she whispered, keeping an eye on the big man.

"Yes."

"He was lying."

GUESS WORK

"Lying?" Morgan repeated, surprised.

"Not so loud!" the stable hand whispered harshly. "Yes, he was lying."

"How do you know?"

Renna arched her eyebrow and shot the ranger a pointed look.

"All right," Morgan conceded, "I guess you would know."

"So what are you going to do?"

The ranger shrugged.

"*Nothing?*"

"It doesn't change the fact that we still need to find out what did that to the fields."

Renna grasped Morgan's arm sharply, causing him to flinch. "All they have done is lie to us, and you're just going to follow them blindly and not ask any questions? What reason do you have to trust either of them, especially Zanadar, he almost got you-both of us-killed, or had you forgotten about that already?"

Morgan started to respond, but the big man noticed the commotion and turned away from Elandar. "And what are you two arguing about?" he asked, grinning broadly.

Renna nestled her head up against the ranger's arm and flashed a sweet smile. "Who says we're arguing?" At that, Morgan began to blush furiously, which elicited only a larger grin from the big man.

"I see," he said.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," the ranger mumbled quietly after Zanadar had turned his attention elsewhere.

She looked back up at him. Her large brown eyes narrowed slightly as a fiendish smirk spread across her lips. She gazed at the ranger coolly for a moment, which made him quite uncomfortable, then abruptly laughed and turned away. Morgan was not quite sure how he was supposed to take that, but was convinced talking would only make it worse. He let out a brief sigh and continued into the village.

The worn road leading back through Rindol Field now teemed with activity. Halflings pushing carts of all shapes and sizes full of a variety of crops from the fields weaved in and out of larger wagons drawn by small teams of ponies. Though even with all the movement the town's residents still managed to appear relaxed and generally content.

It did not take long to reach the small stable building. The party quickly gathered their horses, apologizing profusely to an irate young stable boy whom Gray seemed to have offended dearly, and after a brief stop to gather a small amount of supplies, departed.

On horseback, the group stuck out from the rest of the crowd, and attracted quite a bit of attention. Taller visitors were fairly common to Rindol Field, but visitors wearing armor and weapons such as Zanadar's were not. Elandar received many friendly waves as townsfolk recognized him from the previous night, each of which he returned with a dark glower.

"How odd," Renna observed as they continued back towards the farm, "They seem to like you, Elandar."

"They're Halflings," the old man huffed, "They like everything."

Soon they had reached Farmer Harkin's field again. The party rode around the side of his modest home and began down the hill. The mayor seemed to have left, but Morgan could see Jon off in the distance tending to a group of plants. He looked up as they passed and waved. "Good luck," he called out.

The tracks were not hard to follow at first. They continued down into the muddied valley and stayed mostly on lower ground. Morgan had tracked animals much smaller working on much less many times before. Though the grass was tall and thick, this was relatively simple. Even someone who did not know what they were looking for could have very well followed this particular trail.

They rode at a leisurely pace, talking idly while Morgan surveyed the ground around them. "There doesn't appear to be any particular pattern here," the ranger observed after a while.

"What do you mean?" asked Renna.

Zanadar pointed at the scattered imprints in the ground. "He means it looks like they just wandered aimlessly through the valley until they reached Jon Harkin's farm."

"Right," Morgan said, nodding, "And there is no consistency to their movement. Sometimes they are running, other times they are walking. At times they're going straight and others just in circles."

Renna leaned off Gray's back slightly and stared at the ground suspiciously. "You can tell all of that just by looking at some footprints?"

"It has to do with how deep and how far apart they are," Morgan explained, "Once you know what to look for it really is not that hard." He gazed across the valley. "Though it is going to more difficult. The trail looks like it is going to lead up over that hill, which means it will be harder to follow."

"...Because it's not where all the mud was." Renna said.

"Exactly," Zanadar replied, "We will have you tracking with the best of the rangers in no time."

She looked at Morgan and grinned. "I already am," she boasted playfully.

The big men held up his hands. "I stand corrected," he agreed as they neared the end of the valley. Despite Zanadar and the stable hand's joking, Morgan did his best to follow the trail up side of the hill. There were very few solid tracks but several moderately sized patches of displaced dirt amongst the tall grass suggested recent activity.

Unfortunately, the patches seemed to have no point of origin. They were scattered over the hillside in no particular order and worse yet, did not continue up past the crest of the foothill. He frowned.

"What is it?" Zanadar asked.

"I am having trouble picking up the trail," the ranger admitted, "There's no prints here and though I would wager a good deal those dirt piles came from them too, they don't go anywhere."

"Don't worry Morgan," Renna teased in a reassuring tone, "We still think you're the best. Don't we Zanadar?"

"Right," the big man replied. He peered down off his saddle at the ground. For several moments he scanned the area for any signs of passage, leading his horse in small circles through the grass. "I don't see anything either," he reported at last.

"I knew a blind ranger once," Elandar stated suddenly.

Morgan blinked, still concentrating on the ground. "What?"

"He could track better than both of you combined."

The ranger looked up. The old man had ridden a short distance ahead, stopping at the top of the hill. "All right..." he said uneasily, unsure exactly how to respond.

"Do I have to do everything myself?" Elandar muttered something under his breath and pointed out in front of him. "Look," he said as he peered out into the countryside.

The rest of the group rode up next to the old man and followed his gaze down the hill. "What are we looking for?" Zanadar asked.

"You don't see it?" Elandar replied, sounding somewhat surprised.

Morgan surveyed the landscape before him. Rolling green hills continued to stretch out beyond his vision. Trees of varying sizes springing from the high grass littered the countryside. Small pockets of bushes grew around their base and frequently spread out farther into the landscape.

It was nearing midday. The sun now sat almost directly overhead, warming the usually brisk Thestran countryside. A large flock of birds soared through the sky in the distance, calling out to one another as they dove and twisted about in the air.

The big man let out an annoyed curse. "Don't answer a question with a question. What am I looking for?"

"I'm not quite sure what you want us to see either," Morgan offered.

Elandar held out his staff and pointed off into the distance. "Look," he said, "Near the tree on that hill."

The ranger narrowed his eyes, trying to spot what the old man was pointing at. The hill looked to be fairly close, but he knew it was actually deceptively far. It would take them at least a few hours to reach it.

"I still don't know what you're talking about," Zanadar said between clenched teeth, nearly growling.

"Do you see that brown patch on the ground? It's a pile of dirt similar to those behind us."

"Similar?" the big questioned acidly.

"They are the exact same thing, meathead. Whatever made these made that. Don't use that tone with me."

Morgan could barely make out the brown patch. Had the old man not labeled it as such he would have never noticed it. "Are you sure that's what that is?" Morgan asked politely, "I can't really tell."

"Of course I'm sure, tenderfoot." Elandar shot back, "You think just because I'm old that means I can't see anymore. I will have you know that my eyes are more capable right now than yours will ever be."

The ranger gave Zanadar a questioning look.

"Well, we don't have much else to work off of," the big man replied, "We might as well go and see."

They rode in silence for a time, each seemingly content with the company of their own thoughts. Morgan continually scanned the ground beneath them

as the horses trudged onward. A few times, he spotted marks that could have been made by the creatures they followed. Or they could have been made by wolves, he had no way of telling for sure and was beginning to have doubts that the old man had in fact, seen what he had claimed.

By the time they reached the point Elandar had spotted, it was mid afternoon. The sun hung heavily in the sky and had long since dried the morning dew. Though it was a pleasant day, a steady breeze kept the group chilled. As they crested the hill, Morgan could clearly see the large patch of displaced dirt. It sat a few dozen paces to the side of a lone, gnarled tree. Its thick trunk was short, and sprouted off into several directions just a few feet above the ground. The tree's branches stretched over the hilltop and were thick with leaves, forming a near canopy over all beneath.

Scrubby bushes spread out from under it and back over the other side of the hill. It looked as though something had dug a shallow, circular trench into the soft earth, piling the loose soil up on one side.

The dirt at the bottom of the trench had been packed tightly into the ground. Morgan slid out of his saddle and kneeled next to it to look closer. He stood up and gazed back at Elandar, a look of surprise on his face.

"It's very faint, and I can barely see it but there is definitely a track in there," he reported. "I never would have seen this, Elandar. How did you spot it?"

"Great, now he'll never be quiet about it," Zanadar muttered under his breath.

The old man shot Zanadar a caustic glance. "My hearing is even better than my sight, you know." He turned his attention back to the ranger and shook his staff with one bony old hand, "And by the gods, I'm a mighty wizard! How do you think I spotted it? Don't look so surprised."

The big man peered into the shallow trench from atop his horse. "It looks like a shelter of some sort," he said conclusively. "They probably slept here, which would explain why the bottom is packed so tightly."

Morgan nodded. "That's what I was thinking." He peaked out over the side of the hill. His face brightened a bit as he saw the land stretched out before him. Several small bushes had been quite obviously trampled by something heavy. Beyond that though, there was nothing. "Well, it isn't much," he said, "But I can tell you they went this way."

"It's a good start," the big man replied. He rode around the dirt shelter, next to where the ranger stood and peered out over him to the south. "And judging by the looks of that," he gestured at the next closest hill in the direction Morgan had indicated, "They stayed in the valley. The soil is loose and rocky, and the incline too steep. It would be easier to just go around rather than try to climb up."

Zanadar and Morgan both looked down into the valley with their eyes narrowed, they gazed appraisingly at the land below.

"So did they go east or west then?" Renna asked finally, after a long silence.

"Hard to say," the ranger answered, "Upwind most likely, but we don't have anyway of knowing which way the wind was blowing when they passed through here."

"Well," the big man said with a shrug, "The wind is blowing east now."

"East then?" Morgan asked.

"Wait a minute," Renna interrupted, "You're just going to *guess*? You don't have any kind of ranger tricks to tell you which way they went?"

"A great deal of tracking is guess work, Renna." Zanadar answered for Morgan.

She frowned. "That isn't a very reassuring thing to hear."

"The trick is to guess right," he said with a grin, "That's what separates the good trackers from the bad."

It took only a few minutes for the group ride down into the valley. As suspected, there were no additional tracks or signs of the creatures to be had, so they continued on to the east. They stuck to low ground as they circled through the dense grass around the base of the large hill.

Gradually, the ground began to slope upward to meet the hilltops and they found themselves rising out of the valley. There was still no sign of the creatures, but they continued nonetheless. Soon, the group stood atop a small knoll among a narrow cluster of trees overlooking the surrounding countryside.

"We haven't seen anything for a while now," the big man pointed out. He glanced up at the sky. The sun was beginning to sink into the horizon. "If we're going to circle back we need to make a decision soon, we only have another hour or so of daylight left."

Morgan surveyed the area around them. Behind the party, to the north, the hills rolled back into the distance and out of sight. To the south, the land flattened into a grassy field and gradually sloped downward. With a sigh, the ranger turned back towards Zanadar. He opened his mouth to reply, but stopped short. Several hundred paces out into the tall grass something moved. Something big.

He looked to the big man.

Zanadar nodded. "I saw it too."

SHADES OF GRAY

It moved again. The creature stood up from the concealing grass, tilted its stout head slightly and sniffed the air. It had rough, splotchy gray skin and a bulky, hunched body. Its long, muscular arms reached down from its broad shoulders and disappeared into the brush. At this distance and with the covering it was impossible to determine the creature's exact size, but Morgan could quite plainly tell that it was bigger than he was.

Renna stared wide-eyed into the field. "What is that?" she asked quietly, her gaze trained on the beast.

Zanadar peered intently at the creature for a moment and then tightened the straps on his armor. "It's a troll," he said simply, testing the grip on the sheathed sword across his back. "And it's been causing the trouble at Jon Harkin's farm." He noticed the stable hand's uneasiness. "It's quite all right. We're upwind, and it doesn't see us."

Renna did not look convinced. "Why didn't you tell us what it was before? You were lying when you said you didn't know what made the tracks."

Elandar's eyebrow arched. He gave the big man a slightly amused expression. "It seems you aren't nearly as clever as you think you are," he said with a grin.

Zanadar shrugged. "I suspected they were troll tracks, but I didn't know for sure, and I didn't want to cause any excitement if I was wrong."

Morgan did not believe that for a second, but something else was bothering him. "What is a troll doing here?" He asked, "I've never even heard of one in this region."

"You're right about that," the big man answered, happy to change the subject. "It is a long way from home. Your guess is as good as mine as to why it's here. Trolls tend to do most of their thinking with their stomachs. I'd wager that had something to do with it."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Renna asked, still carefully watching the beast.

"We have to kill it," Zanadar replied, "They are vicious, violent creatures. If we don't, it's only a matter of time before it feeds on Halflings instead of their pigs." Zanadar frowned. "It's probably a little late to be asking this, but how well trained are these horses?"

"They're the best we have," the stable hand said, "They won't spook."

"Well, at least that's good news. Morgan, how skilled are you with those maces of yours?"

"Why?" the ranger asked dubiously.

"If I charge it, it may run. I need you to circle around the side and keep it between us. Can you do that?"

Morgan had never seen a troll before, let alone fought one. "I can try."

"Good. Let's get this over with then. I'll circle around to the west," the big man pointed his mailed glove in the opposite direction, "You go around to the east. Just don't let it get by you. I'll do the rest." With that, he nudged his horse into a subdued trot and looked back over his shoulder to Renna and the old man. "You two stay here. As long as you don't move, you shouldn't draw any attention to yourselves."

"I was slaying monsters before you were born," Elandar rebutted, "Worry about yourself."

"Be careful, Morgan," Renna called softly as the ranger began to slowly ride around the opposite side of the troll. Morgan carefully removed the darkened maces from his traveling pack, all the while keeping his eyes on the creature, which seemed preoccupied with something in the waving grass.

Morgan had not known what to expect after finding the tracks. But a troll? The ranger would never have guessed such a creature would wander this far from its home and end up in the peaceful land of the Halflings. Yet here it was. Morgan grinned. After all that had happened in the past several days, he did not know why he was the least bit surprised now.

He could see Zanadar circling around the creature on the other side, gradually inching closer. The troll batted playfully at whatever it had discovered on the ground, probably tormenting some small animal. Across the field, Morgan stayed even with Zanadar, while keeping himself at a safe distance. He was nervous and found himself holding his breath as he inched silently around the beast.

Suddenly, the wind changed direction, gusting strongly towards the troll. Morgan froze in his saddle. His horse bayed nervously side-to-side as the troll's head shot up and sniffed the air suspiciously. It turned its gaze in the ranger's direction.

Morgan tried to keep himself low, a feat not easily accomplished on horseback, but it was too late- the troll had spotted him. The creature rose out of the grass, its icy stare locked onto the ranger as it reared back and then charged. It barreled through the fields toward him, pounding forward with its large, muscled arms. Despite its size, it was surprisingly quick.

Zanadar spurred his horse. The big man's mount raced through the grass, trying to catch the beast. He shouted something that Morgan couldn't quite hear as he drew the large sword from across his back. Barely slowing, the troll threw back its head and let loose a deep, penetrating roar.

A pair of large patches of grass behind the creature began to twist about awkwardly as two more trolls stood up in the brush. Morgan heard the big man curse as he pulled up hard on his reigns and narrowly missed colliding with one of the beasts. His horse stumbled to the side but the big man managed to stay mounted. The ranger silently scolded himself. Of course there were more, they knew that from the tracks.

The first troll continued its charge toward the ranger. This was not going how Morgan had hoped. He was not sure how to deal with the beast but was confident that standing there was not the answer. He kicked his horse into action just in time to avoid the troll's rush. The creature let out an angry wail as its charge came up short, then it spun around and lunged at Morgan.

At its full height, the troll stood nearly eye to eye with the mounted ranger. Grasping the reigns tightly in one hand and his mace in the other, he did his best to beat away the beast's powerful claws.

He managed to fend off most of the troll's attempts to maul him and connected a solid blow to the creature's knuckle. The strike only further enraged the beast. As Morgan tried to ride out of its reach, the troll growled viciously and snatched the hind leg of the ranger's horse. With a sharp tug, it pulled the frantic steed to the ground and sent Morgan sprawling into the grass.

The ranger took the fall well and quickly rolled to his feet as the troll turned its attention toward him, allowing the horse to recover and gallop off. So much for it being well trained. Morgan certainly did not blame it though. He readied himself as the beast reared up on its legs to attack. It towered over Morgan, its shadow enveloping him completely. Its rank breath seeped into the air as the troll seethed and furiously hurled its fists at Morgan.

The ranger was outmatched and he knew it. On foot he was at a serious disadvantage, though he had little time to dwell on it. He barely managed to jump aside as the troll's rocklike fists pounded into the ground beside him. Moving quickly, Morgan swung fiercely at the creature's wrist, leaving a painful contusion that began to swell immediately from the impact of the heavy blow.

The troll bellowed loudly in pain and jerked its arm back. It snarled at the ranger and grabbed at him with its uninjured hand. Morgan tried to dodge but faltered and stumbled into the creature's grasp. It gripped him painfully around the torso, its long, thick fingers squeezing the air from his lungs as it lifted him from the ground. He struggled to break its hold, swinging feebly at its arms, but the troll was too strong. It secured its grip with its wounded hand and began to squeeze, crushing the ranger.

As the beast tightened its grasp Morgan began to feel light headed. "Morgan!" he thought he heard a voice call out. The troll looked momentarily back over its shoulder, allowing the ranger to glimpse Renna breaking from the cover of the trees, galloping full speed towards him on Gray. The large horse looked angry, and gnashed at its bit as it charged through the grass. Elandar called out for her to stop, but if the stable hand heard the old man's shouts she ignored them.

The troll paused briefly at the sight of Gray racing through the field and loosened its grip on the ranger. Morgan began to wriggle and the creature turned its attention back toward him just in time to catch the ranger's boot on

the underside of its chin. The beast was unfazed and pulled Morgan closer, baring its teeth in a menacing snarl. The ranger quickly drew his mace back and, summoning all of his strength, swung it at the beast's head.

It slammed into the troll's temple with a sickening crack. The beast staggered backward, releasing the ranger. Morgan fell to the ground, gasping for breath. A crimson patch stained the side of the troll's head as it whirled about awkwardly, trying to stay on its feet. The ranger heard the thundering cadence of Gray's steel-shod hooves and looked up just in time to see Renna leap from the mighty horse's back and into the safety of the grass, rolling to a stop perhaps a dozen paces away.

The troll, still reeling from the blow, made a weak attempt to defend itself from the charge. But Renna's horse simply powered through, crashing headlong into the beast with tremendous force. The troll was hurled backward several paces and crumpled to the ground in an agonizing wreck. It cried out pathetically and tried in vain to rise to its feet, much to the delight of the angry horse, who gleefully stomped the troll into one final, broken heap.

Morgan wheezed for air. "I'm glad he's on our side."

"Me too," Renna said as she rushed over to where the ranger lay. "Are you all right?"

His chest ached and it was difficult to catch his breath. "I'll be fine," Morgan answered stoically. "Thank you." He struggled to his feet and looked around for Zanadar, spotting the big man back toward the center of the field. The tall grass around him was spattered with red. Zanadar grappled with one of the trolls but the other was nowhere in sight. With a deep, painful breath, the ranger began to rush toward him.

Zanadar broke away from the creature, clenched his fists and landed several powerful blows to its midsection. It reeled forward, lashing out at the big man. He stepped aside easily, letting the attack brush past him and leapt onto the troll's back, driving the creature into the ground. Morgan could not see what was happening in the tall grass, but a moment later the troll stood back up. Zanadar still clung to its back. His strong arm was wrapped tightly around the beast's neck, choking it. The big man kicked at the back of the beast's knee. It buckled, sending the two back down into the dirt. For several seconds they thrashed about wildly in the grass. Then, after a long pause, Zanadar emerged. He brushed off his hands and glared down at the ground, looking genuinely annoyed.

"Are you all right?" Morgan asked, panting, as he reached the big man.

Zanadar cursed. "Yeah," he replied, "I cannot believe I didn't see them." Though the grass was splashed with streaks of blood, none of it appeared to be from him. Except for his stormy expression and the absence of his sword, Zanadar appeared to be fine. Then he looked up. "How about you?"

"Nothing that won't heal," Morgan said, as Renna led Gray up behind him. "I had a little help." He gave the big man a peculiar look. "Where's your sword?"

Zanadar muttered something under his breath and stalked off into a particularly large patch of red grass. He reached down into the brush and, with a stomach-turning, wrenching noise, pulled his sword out of what Morgan presumed to be the other troll- though at this point it was somewhat hard to recognize. "It got stuck," he explained sourly. He gave the messy blade a disgusted look and wiped it off on the grass.

Elandar emerged from the cover of the trees and casually strolled over to join the group. "Fool girl," he said, "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"When the alternative is cowering behind a tree with you," she chirped back tartly, "I'll risk it."

Morgan bent forward and put a steadying hand on Gray's saddle for support as he erupted into a brief fit of coughing. "Are you sure you're all right?" Zanadar asked.

The ranger held up his other hand. "I'm fine," he assured him as the coughing subsided, "I'll just be sore for a few days."

Elandar looked around, scratching at the rim of his hat as he took in the surroundings. "Where is your horse?" he said to Morgan.

"It ran off after the troll grabbed it."

"It couldn't have gone far," Renna added, "It shouldn't take us too long to find it."

"Well," Zanadar said expansively, "We'd better start looking then. We don't have much daylight left and we need to find it before dark."

Renna looked confused. "Why?"

The big man gave the stable hand a hard look, and then replied. "Because these trolls weren't fully grown, which means that tonight, there's going to be a very unhappy mother out."



OUTCAST

PART ONE

Therdon wiped the blood from his eye, keeping his gaze locked on his opponent. The dwarf's lungs pumped to feed his aching muscles; he no longer felt the axe gripped in his rough, scarred hands. Only the weight of it pulling on his exhausted arms assured him it had not fallen to the ground. A knot was forming in his right thigh from a blow that had nearly cost him his life. Therdon was in trouble.

The two dwarves circled each other, their boots kicking up dust on the banks of the Malvinar River, nothing more than a creek this close to the mountains during the late summer days. The air was dry and the heat from the mid-day sun sucked at what strength remained in their battered bodies.

This was not the first time Therdon and Colthrun had met in battle. The two wore the scars of their previous encounters as badges of honor. Mercy and luck had allowed this personal war to continue after many such battles, yet this time both dwarves knew it would end today.

For Therdon, the path to honor lay only through victory. He had never lost and did not know the feeling of defeat. For that very reason, as his leg began to stiffen and blood continued to flow into his eye, he knew he would be the victor.

Therdon watched the look of confidence grow in Colthrun's face as his limp grew more pronounced. Let Colthrun enjoy his confidence, he thought, let him smell victory.

Therdon faked a small stumble to his right. Immediately, Colthrun's mighty hammer came swinging up to catch him under the chin. Using the motion of his stumble, Therdon dipped his shoulder and pushed off his right foot. The hammer rushed past his face, missing its mark, sending it high into the air. Therdon released his axe, letting it fall. It was no longer needed. The momentum of the failed attack left Colthrun's arms high above his head, his midsection exposed.

Therdon's left shoulder slammed into the dwarf's abdomen, driving the breath from his lungs. Therdon wrapped his arms around his opponent, locking his hands together in a death grip as the dwarves crashed to the ground.

His arms, hardened by years spent in the forges of Bordinar's Cleft began to crush the life out of the other dwarf.

"I give! I give!" gasped Colthrun, with what little air remained in his lungs.

"Bah! I win again!" Therdon shouted as he released his grip and pushed himself off his battered friend, "You really thought you had me that time!"

Colthrun looked up at his grinning friend and spat a curse under his breath. The two young dwarves had been friends for as long as either of them could remember. Neither had seen actual battle, but blood and bruises from such mock duels were very real. One such encounter had cost Therdon his left eye. Such was the way with the mountain dwarves of Thestra. They had to be strong. There was no tolerance for weakness. The loss of his eye had only made Therdon a more viscous and clever young warrior.

Therdon was collecting their strewn weapons when Colthrun noticed a glint of light in the dirt at his feet.

"Hey Ther, what's this?"

Colthrun pulled out his dagger and began poking at the object buried in the ground. Therdon walked over and watched as his friend began to carefully excavate the dirt at his feet. Prying carefully with his dagger, the object suddenly popped loose and flew into the air.

Therdon picked up their find and gazed at it as it lay in his hand. The other dwarf scrambled to his feet to look at the new treasure.

"It's cold," muttered Therdon distantly.

The object looked like a coin. It was gold in color and had odd markings engraved into its surface. Even though they were young, they were still dwarves and had an eye for works of metal and stone--this was no ordinary coin. Coins were usually stamped out and were often irregular in shape and size, but this was perfectly round, each engraving was precise and flawless. The markings appeared to be letters or numbers of some type, but neither dwarf had seen anything remotely resembling the engravings before. The markings worked their way around the coin, but only completed a little over half the circumference. The remaining portion was smooth, as if the engraver did not have time to finish his work.

Colthrun reached out and picked up the coin, turning it over. He let out a gasp when he saw the engraving on the opposite side. Staring up at them was the face of a creature they had never seen before. The detail was intense and lifelike. The eyes were sunk deep into the face and the nose was flat, almost snout-like. Its teeth were sharp and elongated. This was the face of a creature neither of the young dwarves would ever care to meet.

“Therdon! Git over here before I have to come down there and drag ye back by yer beard!” came a shout.

The two dwarves snapped back into focus.

“Here, take yer coin” said Therdon as he handed it back to Colthrun.

“Keep it.” Colthrun quickly replied, “Consider it a 'Going Away' present.”

“Move it, lad!” came another shout.

Therdon pocketed the coin and slapped his friend one last time on the shoulder. Grinning, he picked up his axe and ran up the slope to where the caravan had staged. The lead carts had already started down the road and the dwarves began their march south in search of ore. Looking back, Therdon watched as Colthrun shouldered his hammer and began the trek back to Bordinar's Cleft.



Sitting in his small, empty room within the walls of New Targonor, Therdon looked down at the coin in his hand. It had been many years since Colthrun had found it buried in the ground. That was the last time he had seen his childhood friend. Much had changed in the years since their last encounter. Therdon had received word today that Colthrun had died in battle. He cursed himself for not being at the side of his friend, but such was not possible. Therdon was an outcast of his own people. Much had changed. He ran a hand over his smooth chin where his beard had once grown. Outcast.

He continued to look at the coin. He knew much more about the trinket now. It was not really a coin and the face that he rarely cared to look at was that of an orc. It had also changed over the years. Now there were only enough markings to cover a quarter of the circumference. The remainder was smooth. Therdon could vividly recall each time one of the markings had vanished.

"If only Colthrun had kept the coin, maybe he would be alive today" muttered the dwarf.

PART TWO

Therdon shook the dust from his beard, his feet keeping time with the march of the caravan. They had been marching south for three days, their destination the southern region of the Widow's Peak Mountains. There was little talking amongst the dwarves in the caravan. With a mind single to the task at hand, they set their efforts on covering as much distance each day as possible. While dwarves did not mind traveling, it was more of a means to an end. They would wake before sunrise each day and would march until the stars blanketed the sky. At this pace they should reach the scouted area in two more days.

Therdon was excited to be part of the mining company. Only when dwarves became of age were they permitted to leave the area of Bordinar's Cleft. He knew, being the youngest in the company, he would be stuck with the menial tasks; he also knew this was the way of the dwarves. All those older had done the same.

Marching along in the rear of the caravan, Therdon's thoughts were on the mining operations ahead of them. The scouts reported finding what appeared to be a series of ancient silver mines. The initial investigations suggest that the mines were abandoned suddenly and that there were still rich veins of ore.

His thoughts miles away, Therdon nearly slammed into the wagon in front of him as the caravan came to a sudden and unexpected halt. He looked ahead, through the settling dust, in an effort to see what had caused the dwarves to stop their march when his eyes fell upon the horizon far to the south. Great, dark storm clouds boiled in the distance. Flashes of purple lightning could be seen within its depths. Although the storm was far to the south, its size was so great that it felt as though it would overcome the company at any moment. The dwarves stared at the foreboding clouds as they boiled in the distance. There was something unnatural in the way it would expand and then collapse.

"Back to yer wagons!" came a shout from Glimar, the company captain. "We've only a few more hours of light in this day."

The dwarves snapped back to the task at hand and started down the road at a fast pace. Many of them continued to watch the storm on the horizon. It

did not seem right. None of the dwarves had ever seen such a storm. It was unnatural and was moving against the normal flow of weather, casting a troubled shadow over the company.

Glimar chose a small sheltered valley for the evening camp. He knew it was important to the moral of the company to keep the storm out of site as much as possible. It was a bad omen. There had been rumors for strange occurrences far to the south, rumors of the dead walking. Up until now, the dwarves had not placed much stock in such tales, but the site of the storm had caused them to reconsider.

Moods were somber in the camp as the dwarves went about setting up tents and cooking meals. Therdon was out gathering wood for the cooking fires when he found himself at the top of a small hill. Far to the south he could see where the storm lay. A dark void where stars should have been marked its place on horizon. Flashes of light could be seen within the depths of the clouds. Therdon was transfixed by its ominous power.

"Don't be starin too hard at that storm, lad," came a voice from in front of Therdon.

Dropping his armload of firewood, Therdon crouched into a fighting stance while pulling his axe from his back. Before him all he could see was darkness.

"And ye best be puttin that axe away before ye hurt yerself!" came the voice again.

Ahead of him strode a stout figure. As it drew closer, Therdon relaxed.

"Ye nearly scared the life outta me, Kroghthur!" Therdon said as he returned his axe to its place on his back.

"Aye, ya should be scared. There be many dark things about these days." Kroghthur replied.

Therdon began gathering up the dropped firewood, "I thought you were to meet us at the mining site."

"You'll know soon enough. I must speak with Glimar." he said heading off toward the dwarf camp.

Gathering the remaining firewood, Therdon quickly followed Kroghthur into the camp.

Krogthur was one of the dwarf scouts who had located the ancient mining area. The dwarf scouts were a rare and elite group among a race who tended to prefer more social settings. The scouts spent most of their lives alone and on the road. They traveled light, leaving no trace, and could remain hidden when necessary. Scouts were often employed as couriers of sensitive information and helped to keep the dwarves of Bordinar's Cleft informed of the happenings in Thestra. While they were not official in the service of the king they were often called upon for tasks requiring stealth and discretion. One of the oldest scouts, Krogthur was well respected and honored by all the dwarves.

They debated the unexpected appearance of the elder scout while they ate their evening meal. He had been in the captain's tent for nearly an hour. Finally Glimar emerged, followed closely by Krogthur. All the dwarves gathered about to hear the news from their captain.

"Krogthur tells me that the rumors of dead walking are true," started Glimar, "but that there haven't been any seen this far north.

"For the remaining two days of travel no one will be off alone by themselves and we will have armed patrols escort the caravan. This will mean more work for those on the carts and wagons," he continued, "We do not expect any danger, but it is better to be safe."

"What of the storm? Has it got something to do with these walking dead?" came a question from the company.

Krogthur stepped up, "The storm appeared some three days ago on the horizon. Its moving slowly northward against the wind, but as to its nature I cannot be sure. For all I know it could just be an odd storm."

There were a few grunts from the company. They all new this was no odd storm, but at the moment there was nothing to do but keep an eye on its movement.

"Now off to yer tents! I want to be on the road before sunrise!" shouted Glimar.

The next two days of travel were uneventful. The patrols kept watch on the caravan and the storm continued to loom on the horizon. The company arrived at the mining location late on the second day and made camp at the base of a large slope. The dwarves could see the openings of mine shafts up the slope and what appeared to be the remains of rigging.

The next morning Glimar gathered the company to give orders for setting up mining operation. The first matter of business was determining which shafts held the promise of ore. Five groups of two were set to explore shafts on the slope while the remaining dwarves unpacked the wagons and began setting up a permanent camp.

Therdon had been paired with Degmur, one of the younger dwarves in the company. The two of them had been assigned to explore one of the lower shafts on the slope. Its entrance was almost completely blocked with debris. The only indication that a shaft was even there was the twisted rusty cart rails that poked from the rubble. The two dwarves began clearing the rocks and rubble from the entrance and by mid morning had an opening large enough for one of them to squeeze through.

Degmur rummaged around in his pack then produced a small stone jar sealed with wax. He broke the seal and peered at the contents. The jar contained a grayish goo that began to glow almost instantly after the lid was removed. Degmur took a small stick and dipped it into the substance, coating the end. The goo glowed brightly in the clear mountain air. Moving up to the mine opening, Degmur tossed the stick deep into the mine. Both dwarves shielded their eyes from the sun and looked in to where it had fallen. The substance still glowed, although not as brightly as it had outside the mine. The air in the shaft was suitable for breathing. Degmur produced some soft wax from his pack and resealed the jar. After a moment, the glowing began to fade before stopping entirely.

After lighting two torches, the dwarves entered the mine. The temperature dropped dramatically and the air was stale. The mineshaft continued straight into the mountain as far as the dwarves could see. The track rails had rusted and the ties rotted over the years. They would have to be replaced. Most of the rails could be re-forged, but the ties were useless.

Therdon and Degmur surveyed the entrance as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. From the appearance of the mine entrance there was no ore near the opening. It was obvious that these mines had been dug by dwarves. The size of the shaft and the construction of the rails were consistent with dwarf workmanship. The only puzzling thing was there was no memory of mines this far south.

The two dwarves began to follow the rails deep into the mountain. Therdon was glad it was autumn, for the mine was dry and cool. In the spring, water would rain from the ceiling. The mineshaft began to slope slowly downward and to the right. Therdon glanced over his shoulder toward the entrance. A

faint glow marked where the dwarves had entered. As they continued down the shaft it suddenly grew wider to the left. Ore had been found here. Therdon raised his torch to gain a better view of the rock. Brushing the dust away with his hand, he noticed some small bright flecks within the stone. Pulling a small pick from his belt, Therdon chipped at the stone to loosen some of the ore.

“Is it silver?” asked Degmur.

“Do ya see that!” exclaimed Therdon, “This is no silver I have ever seen. It is much too hard.”

The two dwarves began surveying the area. There had once been a rich vein of this ore here, but now all that remained were some flecks surrounding the area where the precious material had lain. The mine continued on and so did the prospect of more ore. Excited, the two continued down the shaft.

At regular intervals, the dwarves encountered small test shafts jutting off from the main tunnel. These had been used to check for the presence of ore and the mine progressed. Suddenly Therdon came to a stop and reaching out he grabbed Degmur's belt dragging him to a halt.

“Do ya smell that?” Therdon asked.

Breathing deeply, “I don't smell anything'cept stale air.” replied Degmur.

“Give it a minute.” said Therdon.

Degmur closed his eyes and slowly took in the stale air. There! It was faint, but he could smell it. There was no mistaking the sour odor of death and decay.

“Aye... I do smell it.”

More cautiously, they continued their decent. The foul stench grew stronger as the two moved deeper into the mine. Although they were still surveying for ore, their attention was divided. Both had come to the realization that there had to be another way into the mine. The entrance they used had been closed for years and this smell was that of decaying flesh...flesh that until recently had been living.

Both dwarves stopped. There was a faint clicking sound. It was erratic and seemed to come in bursts. Therdon cursed under his breath. His axe lay back

in camp. His only weapons, if they could be called that, were the mining tools on his belt. Glancing at Degmur, he could see the other dwarf was equally concerned. Therdon pointed down the shaft and the Degmur nodded.

Thoughts of ore no longer on their minds, the two crept forward in the darkness. The stench grew stronger. It was all Therdon could do to keep from retching. Ahead of them the walls of the mine began to glisten in the torch light. Degmur drew up short.

“Ther! Stop!” he cried.

It was too late. Therdon looked down at the silvery cord on his boot. The alarm had been tripped. Tiny vibrations from the silk cord on Therdon’s boot sent signals to the monster below. The two only paused for a moment and their blood ran cold as a shriek rose from the depths of the mine.

Turning on their heels, the dwarves began to run back the way they had come. Without weapons, they knew their only hope was to exit the mine before the beast below reached them. Behind them, furious clicking announced the spider’s approach. Fueled by terror, their legs pumped and lungs burned as they raced for the surface. They knew they could not out run a giant spider, but hoped they had enough of a lead to make it to the entrance of the mine.

Therdon could hear the advance of the spider as he raced behind Degmur. Searing pain ran through his lungs and spots formed before his eyes, his body starving for air. Fatigued, he could feel himself slowing. As the mine floor began to level out, Degmur let out a cry. The entrance was in sight. Digging deep, Therdon pressed on.

The spider screeched again and without looking Therdon knew the beast was almost upon them. Reaching the entrance, Degmur dove through the small opening and onto the rocky slope. Close behind, Therdon dove also. Instead of clearing the mine, he was brought up short. Fiery pain tore through his back. The spider’s large fangs sank deep into the dwarf’s body. Falling to the ground, he could feel the searing venom begin to flow into his body. Rolling to his back, Therdon looked into the face of death. The spider pinned him to the ground with a mighty leg and raised itself for another strike. With all the remaining strength in his exhausted body, he threw his mining pick into the maw of the descending beast. He heard a sickening crunch and was only vaguely aware as a hot burst of liquid sprayed over his face. No longer able to feel his body, Therdon closed his good eye, and then slowly faded into the darkness.

PART THREE

"He will not make it through the night." said Glimar, watching the labored breathing of the young dwarf.

"Aye... but it is better to die then to be so disfigured." replied Krogthur.

Therdon lay on the floor of his tent fighting for his life. His last act of throwing his pick into the face of the giant spider had given Degmur the chance to pull the fallen dwarf's body from the mine. The beast could not follow through the small opening.

The venom that sprayed over Therdon had badly burned him. His beard, along with most of his hair, was now gone and his exposed skin was red and blistered. Degmur had also been burned, but was expected to recover.

"Poor lad... at least he will not be supper for that monster!" growled Glimar.

"Go get some sleep." said Krogthur "I can watch over him. You have work to do in the morning."

"Humph!"

Glimar left the tent in a rush. He doubted he would sleep much this night, watching the young dwarf die only fueled his anger. Two of the other parties also reported odd smells within the mines. Further exploration would be postponed until they were safe and free of the venomous threat.

Back in the tent, the scout continued to watch over the dying dwarf. His breathing was fast and shallow. Even in the cool night air, sweat covered Therdon's body, soaking his clothes. His body trembled as the poison tightened its hold.

Some time after midnight Therdon's breathing changed. It began to slow and become less labored. The scout knew this was the end. Therdon had lost the fight. Slowly the breaths grew further apart until he exhaled one last time.

As Krogthur rose to cover the body, there was a loud explosion and a blinding flash of green light knocked him back onto the ground. Through the spots before his eyes, he thought he saw a ghostly green figure hovering over the corpse. Krogthur jumped to his feet, and pulled his small axe from his hip. He rubbed his eyes and looked about. The tent was empty save for the body.

Krogthur rushed outside in a daze. Others were emerging from their tents. He was glad they had heard the noise as well. Turning back towards the tent, the scout's blood ran cold. Standing in the opened flap was the disfigured form of Therdon. The scout backed away from the tent, his eyes locked on the dead dwarf.

Therdon tried to speak, but could only cough out a rough sputter.

"What's going on, Krogth..." Glimar asked urgently, rushing up beside the scout. He stopped mid sentence.

"He was dead," muttered Krogthur "I watched him die... now he walks."

The two watched as the dwarf, who was once Therdon, stood at the entrance to the tent trying to speak. Many of the others from the camp began to gather behind them.

"Wahht... essss... haaahp..." Therdon stuttered.

"He is one of the walking dead!" rose a shout from the group "Kill him!"

A rock flew from the group and hit the corpse on the side of the head. Therdon grabbed at his forehead in pain. What was going on? Why was everyone acting so strange? Why couldn't he talk? The last thing he remembered was the spider looming over him back in the mine. Then he woke, finding himself in his tent.

Another rock sailed from the group of dwarves and hit him in the jaw, knocking him back. Then another. *This was not right*, thought Therdon. Though he knew if he stayed standing there he would not have the chance to figure it out. Quickly, he ducked back into the tent. He could hear more rocks hitting the sides' rough fabric, with shouts from the crowd.

Ducking under the rear part of the tent, he was once again outside. He glanced quickly at the sky to gain his bearings. Turning south, he began to run through the brush and trees. He could hear the shouts behind him begin to fade into the distance, but he continued to run.

Lungs burning, Therdon slowed and then fell to the grass, rolling over onto his back. Catching his breath, he stared at the stars above. His mind began to go over the recent events. He remembered running with Degmur from the giant spider in the mine. He recalled the fangs piercing his back, throwing

the mining pick, then blackness. His next memory was awakening in his tent... and that voice. Strange and guttural.

Therdon sat up. Why couldn't he speak?

"Hhelllo... helllo... hello" he said to the night air. He raised his hand to his throat then froze. His beard! It was gone! Touching his face, he could feel the scarred and melted skin, but no beard. A dwarf without a beard was not a dwarf! The venom... he must have gotten some in his throat. That could be why he was having trouble speaking.

He ran his hand over his chin. There was no pain. There was no pain in his back where the fangs had pierced him. His throat did not hurt either, but it felt different, perhaps scarred as well. *How long did I lay there*, he thought. Why was he not dead?

Therdon got to his feet and took inventory of his possessions. He was still wearing the clothes he had been in the mine, although they were now tattered and burned from the spider's venom. His tool belt had been removed, but he was glad to still have his boots. Checking his pockets he pulled out the coin he and Colthrun had found buried in the dirt. Other than the clothes on his back, this was his only possession.

Rolling the coin over in his hand something seemed different. Holding it up high to catch the light of the moon, he looked closely at the markings that circled the coin. Therdon had not examined it very closely, but he was sure there had been more markings before. Had they changed?

He put the coin back into his pocket. It was only a few hours until dawn. In the light of day he would make his way back to the dwarf camp and try to find out what had happened. He hoped the sun would drive away whatever madness had possessed the company the night before. There were many questions to be answered.

SAGE'S GAMBIT

It is done. I have sent young Darion. He wasted no time and left the city early this morning with his "escort". The journey will be quite a test for the boy, though whether he actually makes it to the swamps matters little. So trusting and naive, he asked almost no questions. He believes the temple to be uninhabited.

The Furth family will grieve, of course, and we will offer our deepest sympathies. The boy's eagerness is well known though, convincing his family and the rest of the council ambition was Darion's downfall should not be difficult.

As for our loss, though few know it Darion has already reached his full potential. His powers are very limited and he has little to offer. His family name alone has brought him this far, and I suspect his friendship with the "other" has begun to taint his vision. Though truth be known, that is his most valuable asset. When "he" finds out, he will follow... and Darion's purpose will be served.



Jeric Targonor stalked through the city in a dreadful silence. He moved quickly, and I struggled to keep up. An icy rage emanated heavily from him, wilting away those who stood in his path. Though the hood of his heavy, dark cloak concealed his face, many in the streets still recognized their revered prince. It was hard not to. His brown, shoulder-length hair spilled out from the front of his hood over his finely etched pauldrons, and onto his ornate mail breastplate. A wicked looking axe hung from his belt among a host of small pouches and knives. He clenched his plate-clad fists tightly as he marched deeper into the city.

The townsfolk glanced at Jeric, worry in their faces. His clothes were dirty and his armor stained. He did not look very regal this frigid morning. Then again, Jeric never did. That's why I admired him. It's why we all did. He kept to himself for the most part, and none of us really knew much about him. But we did know he was like no other noble in the city, let alone one of royal blood. He drank in taverns amongst urchins and laborers, not hidden away in some elegant dining hall in the keep. People, ordinary people, came to him with problems and he always listened, never turning them away. He had earned the admiration and loyalty of the common man, though it had come at a heavy price.

"Darion," he said to me as we neared the government sector, his voice controlled and even, "You don't have to come, you know."

Had I not been struggling to keep up I would have laughed. "I'm not about to miss this," I responded, "No way, not after all that has happened."

He grinned slightly. "Fair enough."

Jeric was not entirely popular amongst the city's nobles, especially the royal council. While many privately supported the prince, they dared not admit it, for just as many wished desperately for him to leave the council forever. They viewed him as a brash and tactless miscreant, a vagabond who came and went as he pleased, while ignoring the proper etiquette and procedure.

To be fair, they were mostly right. He had little patience for such matters and were it not for one small nagging detail, I'm sure he would have been happy to oblige their wishes. But, as luck would have it, the heirless king was growing steadily older and planted firmly at the front of the line of succession—was Jeric. Who it worried more, the prince or his enemies, I'll never know. But every night there were many who prayed that the queen would soon be with child.

We approached a very large, guarded building that sat prominently among many other, smaller government establishments. It was several stories tall and elaborate, stained windows were etched brilliantly into its walls. Neatly carved stone steps lead up a small ways to a grand wooden door that was flanked by two well-armed guards, who stared ahead in statuesque poses. One gave us a rather stern look as we ascended the steps.

Jeric ignored the man and walked coolly toward the door. The guard stepped in front of him at the last moment.

"This building is closed to the public," he said. There was a hint of disdain in his voice as he eyed our dirty clothes, "You'll have to leave."

The prince tilted his head toward the guard, letting his hood fall away slightly. "Are you sure about that?" he asked, allowing a small grin.

The guard's eyes widened as he saw Jeric's face. He shrank back, suddenly much smaller. "My lord...", he stammered as he fumbled to open the door, "Forgive me."

There was a time, though it shames me to say it, that I was among those people who wished ill of Jeric. Looking back, I can't say exactly why. We even shared some of the same blood. Jeric's mother had been a Furth, though only distantly related to me. Maybe it was jealousy, I envied the way the commoners treated him on the city streets. I envied the power and respect he commanded among the nobles—even from his enemies, who knew better than to confront the prince directly. But most of all, I envied his ability to defy the Sages.

It's odd that I would find myself jealous of such a thing, I was a member after all, but yet I did. Any other man would have been imprisoned or much worse for such acts. But not Jeric. It was well known that Master Horadus and the prince bitterly despised one another, but even as the head of the Sages Arcane there was little Horadus could openly do, a fact which I'm sure infuriated him all the more while Jeric worked freely outside the confines of the Sages.

The guard meekly pulled the heavy wooden doors open for us. We stepped inside, entering into an elaborately decorated foyer. Vibrantly painted tapestries depicting important events in Thestra's history hung from the ceiling over the rich marble floor. Detailed paintings and murals lined the walls and two broad staircases spiraled up onto the second level from opposing ends of the room. They were split by a large hallway between them leading deeper into the building.

A robed man descending the wide steps from the second floor gave us a startled look, then turned and rushed back up the stairs and off in some unseen direction. The prince ignored him and began towards the hallway.

Jeric had been a member too once, of the Sages I mean, or at least that's how the story goes. Nobody really talks about it, so I don't know how much to believe. He was a mage though, and a powerful one. Jeric was a natural talent. Such people are rare enough as it is, but for one to be born into an important noble family is almost unheard of. I would know, I was one too. Though I hold no illusions of grandeur—my powers are very limited, especially compared to Jeric's. Still, my family name alone was enough to gain entry into the Sages and advance perhaps much faster than my skills warranted.

It wasn't the Sages who had discovered me though, it was Jeric. He offered to teach me to use my power back then, to help me develop and expand it. But being young and foolish I turned him down, thinking him to be a dangerous influence. Soon after, I joined the Sages. Jeric stayed close, and though

he frequently disappeared for weeks on end he visited me occasionally to talk about my progress. I will admit, I enjoyed all the attention, but I soon became keenly aware of the unease the prince's presence was causing around me. Many of the ranking Sages, even old Horadus himself, warned me to beware of Jeric. They claimed his goal was to twist my mind and turn me against the Sages. The irony is certainly not lost on me now.

The hallway ended abruptly and split into opposite directions. Jeric turned right and kept walking, his heavy boots echoing loudly on the hard floor. I heard voices and glanced back over my shoulder just in time to see a door closing at the opposing end of the hall.

We turned off into a side corridor and nearly ran directly into an angry looking robed man walking towards us. A deep frown creased his aged forehead, as he glared down at the pages of a large, withered book. He stopped short and looked up at us, annoyed.

"Why don't you watch where—," he trailed off, his eyes widening momentarily at the sight of Jeric. He quickly regained his composure. "You," he said scowling at the prince. "You think you can just walk in—," he was cut off again though as Jeric brushed past him and continued down the corridor. The old man sputtered furiously, nearly shaking with rage. I did my best to stifle a laugh as I inched past him, and then quickly caught up with the prince.

"You know," I said, "It's a wonder they don't like you very much here."

"What?" he said, feigning surprise, "I thought I was being polite."

I grinned. "I'd hate to see you be rude."

The narrow corridor opened up into another wide hallway. We were deep in the building now. Jeric seemed to know precisely where he was going as he turned another corner. We found ourselves in another wide hall. Several plain doors lined either side of the passage, which ended at a sturdy wooden door with an intricate carving of a tower atop an open book.

As Jeric and I moved toward the end of the passage, one of the doors near the center of the hallway suddenly opened. Out stepped a tall, dark-haired, middle-aged man. He wore finely stitched crimson robes and a well-kept beard. He noticed us immediately and glared at Jeric, hate in his eyes.

The man opened his mouth to speak but was quickly silenced as Jeric, in one smooth motion, drew the axe from his side and continued past him to the

large door at the end of the hall. Jeric tried the handle—locked. He took one quick step back and then brought the axe down forcefully into the heavy wooden frame.

A loud splintering echoed through the passage as Jeric's blow removed a sizable portion of the door and a deep crack raced through the center of the engraving. Without pausing, he kicked the door in and barged into the room.

Packed bookshelves lined the walls of the chamber. A neatly arranged desk sat on one side of the room with several rolled up parchments on its top. A large comfortable bed occupied the other, with a deep, closed wardrobe at its side. "He's not here," Jeric muttered.

The prince turned back toward the hall, and, gripping his axe tightly, stalked toward the dark-haired man staring at us. "You have one chance," he said calmly to the robed man. "Where is he?"

The man glared at the prince for a moment before answering. "The council chamber," he said finally.

Jeric cracked a brief smile. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" he replied dryly. The prince looked back to me. "Come on," he said.

"You're an even bigger fool than I imagined if you think you can confront Horadus here, Jeric," the robed man called out after us, "He knows of your presence, he waits for you."

Jeric glanced back down the hall and gestured casually at the dark haired man, releasing a spell. My jaw nearly dropped as the door behind him suddenly slammed shut violently, knocking the robed man back into his chambers with a heavy thud. The prince gave me a somewhat guilty look.

"All right," he said as we retraced our way back through the building, "that may have been a little rude."

Although we encountered several other robed men in the halls as we made our way to the council chamber, Jeric's demeanor and axe were more than enough to dissuade any sort of confrontation. A few minutes later we stood in a large room on the second story of the building. Light poured in from the large windows along the far wall and onto the fine rug covering the floor. Behind us was a staircase leading back down to the entrance. Directly in front of us were two massive wooden doors. A guard stood in front of them, eyeing us nervously.

As Jeric stared at the doors, his left hand began to pulse slightly with a dull light. I could feel him gathering power from around us. He looked over to me. "Last chance to change your mind," he said.

I shook my head. I'd come a long way, and I'd been through a lot. There was no way I was going to make it this far only to turn back now. I grinned. "Let's do it."



SCOUTING AHEAD

“Uh, Captain? Aren't we a little far out? Maybe Halp's ant³ and the one we killed were it,” Osmal half-whispered, his eyes scanning the surrounding lush green plains. The Halfling youth looked extremely nervous. Back in Rindol Field, however, he had been bright-eyed and filled with the folly and exuberance of an eager cadet.

Now he knows this is real. He's seen one of those monstrosities up close and in full attack, Captain Kasey Umbertroe thought. That brought a grim smile to the Halfling fighter's lips.

They had set out by themselves with direct approval from Mayor Dorbin after Halp Grimbo's discovery of a giant ant attacking his gardens. Not that Kasey would have waited for the mayor's approval anyway. This concerned the fate of Rindol Field and its people. It was her home, and these were her people. Kasey was going to find out the source of these ants and the degree of the infestation. She had planned on going out alone, but unfortunately Osmal Maradin had decided to tag along. Kasey was reluctant at first, but Marki Blant, one of the most respected combatants in Rindol Field, had suggested it would be good experience for the untrained Halfling youth. Kasey was sure that old Marki just wanted to get the bothersome Osmal out of his hair for even a few hours.

Unlike Osmal, Kasey was a seasoned veteran. She was strong for one of their race, with wavy, dark brown hair reaching her shoulders, and unnerving ice-blue eyes. Dressed well for this expedition, she had worn a heavy forest-green cloak with a bronze throat clasp over full earth-toned leather armor. Normally she'd prefer heavier armors, but for a mission like this, mobility was far more important. Lastly, the well-worn and loved long sword Kasey used two-handed was sheathed over her shoulder.

Osmal had not prepared as well for this adventure. He was short, even for a Halfling, and had tousled blond hair that kept falling into his pale brown eyes. He had on chain mail that was too big for him, and was lugging around a hefty brown pack over his shoulders that was filled with random items. He had a brand new, never-used short sword sheathed at his side. Kasey prayed to any gods that listened that this remained a reconnaissance mission, and

3. *This account from Rindol Field takes place shortly after Halp Grimbo's evening encounter. See “Halp and the Field Thief” on page 53 for more details.*

that the apprentice fighter would never have to draw his sword near her again until he learned not to stab with his eyes closed.

Osmal had almost skewered her when one of those monstrous ants had attacked them. Thankfully it was alone, and Kasey did not have much trouble dispatching it in a single blow. However, Osmal had released a high-pitched scream and went on a stabbing frenzy with his sword. Kasey had to dodge him as the untrained Halfling flailed about. It took roughly ten minutes to calm him down and assure him the ant was dead.

That ant was dead, but that meant nothing. There were more, Kasey knew. And as they passed by a jutting rock in the grassy landscape, her proof erupted in front of her. Three giant ants, much larger than her, rushed out to attack the two Halflings. Kasey's sharp eyes spied their tunnel emerging from a nearby hillside, almost completely concealed by vegetation. The ants moved with surprising speed, their mandibles clacking, and their antennae wagging rapidly.

Kasey could hear Osmal whimpering behind her, but did not have time to deal with him. Unsheathing her longsword and gripping it tightly with both hands, she charged at the ants. Her first move was brilliantly executed - a sweeping slash towards the creature's legs. The blade tore through the insect's chitinous hide, and severed the legs, causing it to crumble to the ground. She realized that was her only free shot, however, as one of the other ants moved in to bite her. Bringing her blade up to parry, she fought off the mandibles, but was pressed back by the strength of the abomination.

As the Halfling veteran kept on the defensive, looking for an opening, she suddenly realized that if she was only fighting one of the ants, that Osmal might be in serious trouble. Stealing a glance, she saw the trainee waving his sword about wildly at the ant, who seemed unsure of getting too close. The glance cost Kasey though. The ant she was engaged with tore its mandibles into her, ripping through the armor and tearing a deep scratch across her right arm. Grunting in pain, she lunged forward before the ant could recover, thrusting her longsword completely through the ant's head, causing the creature to twitch and fall to the ground, dead.

Immediately, Kasey whirled around to deal with the last ant. Horror struck her as she realized it had disarmed Osmal, and was about to move in for the kill. Dashing directly at the creature, the Halfling soldier let out a loud shout as she leaped into the air, and came down with the sword in a chopping fashion. The ant whirled around at the noise, and received Kasey's well-kept longsword right into its skull. Fluids leaked from the wound as the creature

collapsed, and Kasey, breathing steadily but heavily, wiped of her sword and re-sheathed her weapon.

Osmal had closed his eyes, pressed up against a boulder, and was weeping. Kasey sighed, reached into a pouch at her side to produce a roll of bandages, and started dressing her own wound.

“Osmal, are you hurt anywhere?” she asked quietly.

“N-no,” the youth replied, and looked up at her with a dirt and tear streaked face. “I want to go home.”

Kasey sighed, and nodded. “Yes. Let's get you home, then.” Tucking the bandages away, she reached a hand down to help the young man up. Osmal brushed himself off, adjusted his pack, and gave a weak smile in return.

As Kasey started to head back towards Rindol Field with Osmal in tow, she realized now that the fight was over that there was a sound of activity over the next hill. Frowning, she turned to Osmal.

“Wait here.”

Without pausing for a response, Kasey walked quickly up the hill. Stopping near the crest to put a hand on her weapon, she hit the ground and edged up slowly. Peering over the edge, the Halfling's blue eyes widened in astonishment.

Ants. There must be thousands of them, she thought. She watched in terror for a few seconds as the creatures scurried around on the plains below, intent on their gathering of food. Osmal had disobeyed Kasey's order to stay put and now stood behind her. She gave a horrified whisper to the young Halfling:

“We're going back right now Osmal, and we are telling everyone about what we've seen. This is serious...”

SECRECY'S PRICE

RENDIL⁴

"Rendil, you best be home by sunset today," instructed Milus. "And I don't want you traipsing about after those Sages again."

"I will be home, papa. I promise." Rendil looked up at his father giving him the quick, small smile that always seemed to melt Milus' heart.

Milus patted Rendil's head and then quickly smoothed the shoulders of the boy's tunic. "All right, off with you now. And no troublemaking, you hear?"

"I know, papa." And with that Rendil ran out of the smithy and down the cobbled road towards the city's center. Milus watched until Rendil had turned the corner and then stepped back to the forge.

"You worry too much, Milus," said Elvara. "He is just a boy. How much trouble can he possibly make? Especially here in Targonor."

"You have no idea what he is capable of getting into. And Elvara, although I know you mean well, it won't be until you have your own child that you can understand."

"I'm sorry, my friend. I know it has been difficult for you since you lost Marlene."

"It's just that...well, she used to take care of him while I worked. I suppose I never really considered the amount of effort it takes to raise him." Rendil's shoulders visibly slumped as his face softened, revealing the sorrow he had carried for the past year. "I just miss her."

"I know you do." Elvara walked over to Milus, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You're my dear friend. Just let me know if I can help."

4. Several collections of letters have been found and compiled regarding the relationships between Hanrick, Rendil, and the Sages Arcane. This compilation can be found on page 263.

"I appreciate that. Thanks for offering." Milus picked up his hammer from the anvil. "Now, these swords aren't going to make themselves. Let's get going."



Rendil loved the carefree days; the days of no chores, no schooling, and best of all, no hot and sweaty work carrying heavy iron through the smithy. The carefree days were his days to explore, to learn the things not taught in school. Rendil learned the most from observing. Often, he found a perch above an awning in the market square and watched the business of buying and selling. He also saw the nimble fingers of the thieves and cutpurses at work; the clever sleights of hand that switched one item for another while purchasing. He watched the subtle distractions created to help a partner steal a particularly juicy piece of fruit or a shiny locket from the jeweler's carts.

Rendil watched and noted the actions required for each larcenous feat. Several times, he even climbed down from his position and performed the maneuvers on an unsuspecting merchant. Each time he did this, he dared more by choosing a riskier target. So far, his luck, or his skill, had held out and he had not been caught. However, after each escapade, he felt guilty and would find a way to return the recently purloined item to its rightful owner.

For Rendil, it wasn't about the theft. It was about perfecting the skills. He didn't want the items nor did he steal for gain. Stealing meant nothing to him; it was the drive for understanding, the wish to know exactly what the thieves' actions felt like that led him to practice their arts.

One of his other favorite groups to watch was the Sages Arcane. The long colored robes they wore, the books they carried, the snippets of conversations they engaged in, all fascinated him. It was as if they lived in another world apart from everyone else. Rendil wanted to understand their lofty speech and pierce their heads-in-the-cloud oblivion, to find out why they seemed so different.

On this day, Rendil made his way up a favorite alleyway just off the market square, along the road towards a back entrance into the Sages Academy. He heard some voices coming from the other end of the alley. Working his way along the shadows, he was finally able to see two sages standing close together, conversing in hushed tones. One was dressed in a dark gray robe, his long hair pulled back into a ponytail held by a leather cord. The other, taller than the first, wore a red robe. Most of their conversation was in whis-

pers but Rendil could sometimes pick out words here and there. The Sages were talking about some theory on magic. The subjects of several overheard snippets revolved around spell casting and secret books and words of powers. From time to time, the pair of Sages would look about them to make sure no one was near. Each time they did, Rendil would creep further into the shadows of the alley to avoid discovery.

His eavesdropping so engrossed him that he failed to hear the near silent footsteps behind him. However, the open-handed slap to the back of his head certainly got his attention.

“What are you doing skulking here?” asked the newcomer. “Are you spying on my brother Sages?” The stranger grabbed hold of Rendil’s tunic and held him firmly in front of him. Rendil could still not see his captor. Instead, he cast his eyes downward at the ground while furiously running through scenarios of escape in his mind. “Fellows, I think we have a spy here. Come look.”

The two Sages he had been watching turned in Rendil’s direction. One of them said, “Who’s there? And what are you babbling about?”

“Oh sorry, didn’t realize you couldn’t see me. I’m Golath,” said the Sage behind Rendil. “I just caught this boy watching you two. I think he’s a spy.”

“A spy you say?” replied the first Sage. “Now why would a boy like him be interested in us or what we say? Let him g—,” The other Sage placed his hand on the arm of the speaker and whispered something to him.

The second sage then began to speak. “Thank you for warning us of this possible spy. I don’t think there are many spies about the alleys of Targonor interested in the scholarly jousting of two such as us. However, you can never be sure. He does look harmless but we shall see.”

The Sage walked into the alley and stopped in front of Rendil. “Now, let’s get a look at you.” Golath released his hold on Rendil and the Sage placed his hand on Rendil’s shoulder and leaned down to look at the boy’s face. “What’s your name?”

“Rendil, sir.”

“Address me as Master, not sir. Why were you in this alley? Were you following us?”

Rendil did his best to try to calm his nerves. This situation was not turning out the way he intended. "No, sir, I mean Master. I was looking for my cat in the alley here. She ran away."

"Your cat?" The Sage stood up. "I think not. There's no cat here. You're lying to me! One last chance, boy. What were you doing?" The Sage towered over Rendil, his voice taking on a tone that clearly showed the authority and command he was used to.

"I... I was watching you. I'm sorry," choked Rendil.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just watch people who are interesting." The first tears slid down his cheek.

"Did someone tell you to watch us? Someone dressed like us?"

"No, Master. No one. I just like watching people."

The Sage stood quietly for several seconds just staring intently at the boy. Those seconds felt like an eternity to Rendil. "I believe you. You are telling me the truth now. I can tell by your face." Turning to Golath, who had moved away from the back of Rendil to the side of the Sage, he said, "Take him home. Tell his parents what he did and instruct them to keep him away from Sages." Looking back at Rendil he added, "Bad things can happen to spies!"

The sage added, "Thank you again, Golath, for your...vigilance. If there is anything I can do to repay your assistance, please ask. I am Dorrin Longreat, and my associate is Vinton Mepson. You can find me most days within the Academy."

"You are most welcome, Dorrin," said Golath. "I will certainly let you know." Grabbing a hold of Rendil's hand, Golath turned back down the alley. "Come along, Rendil. We have an appointment with your parents."

Dorrin watched them disappear out the far end of the alley and then walked back to Vinton.

"Dorrin, do you think he understood anything we were talking about?"

"You mean the boy? I doubt it. But if he did, we will know soon enough. I do have one task for you though."

"What is it?"

"Find out more about this Golath. There is no reason he should have been here. It's too convenient. As for the boy, he is my responsibility. That is one boy I will be watching very closely."

THE INVITATION

"I want you to take on an apprentice," said Dorrin.

Hanrick looked up from the leather-bound tome he was studying in the dim small room. He was surprised to find Dorrin awake at such a late hour as his usual schedule had him retiring to his room right after the evening meal and then rising right before dawn. Hanrick knew his teacher's habits well and had made good use during his apprenticeship of Dorrin's absent hours. The time on his own had allowed Hanrick to delve deeper into the thick volumes on theoretical magic that were among the few books to survive the flight from Targonor to the new seat of the Thestran kings.

"Dorrin, are you sure I'm ready?" asked Hanrick. "I was only your apprentice for 3 years."

"You are no longer an apprentice. Grow up, Hanrick!" Dorrin's brow furrowed with agitation. He was not a man used to being questioned, especially by a former apprentice. "You were made a full member just two weeks ago. The times have changed. They had to change after what happened in Targonor. We no longer have the luxury of coddling newer members."

Dorrin pulled up a chair and sat opposite Hanrick. Reaching over and closing the book Hanrick had been studying, Dorrin continued, "Now, I have already chosen your apprentice. I was going to take him myself but I am confident in your ability to pass on the training I so graciously imparted to you."

"If you feel I am ready, then I accept your task. I do have one question, though."

"Yes?"

"Am I allowed some leeway in the teaching methods?"

"Were you not satisfied in your own training?" Dorrin arched his eyebrow and stared at Hanrick.

"No, that was – is not the issue, Master. My training was exemplary. I would just like to employ some methods I have been reading about."

Dorrin leaned back in his chair, studying Hanrick. "I suppose that will be acceptable. He will be your charge and, ultimately, your responsibility, whether he succeeds or fails. The Sages Arcane needs as many well trained members as we can muster. However, you must inform me of your training methodology upon my request and I must have access to your apprentice as required."

Hanrick was caught off guard by this last request and it showed on his face as his mouth tightened. Normally, the relationship between a mentor and an apprentice was one of trust. Once an apprentice became a full member of the Sages Arcane, his former mentor never asked for, nor needed, contact with the new apprentices and trusted that the proper training would be carried out.

"Rest assured, Hanrick," added Dorrin, clearly trying to ease the worries of his one time apprentice. "It isn't that I don't trust you. I have the utmost confidence in you. My task is to make sure we get the best apprentices we can." Pulling out a letter from the folds of his robes, Dorrin passed it across the table.

Hanrick picked up the letter and opened it. Reading aloud, he said, "Rendil Wainscott, to be found in the vicinity of the Tuhr Smithy?" Reading further, he then added, "I see no reports of his testing in this. Where are the notes?"

"Oh, he was tested in Targonor," replied Dorrin. "The notes, like so many other things were lost. In fact, I tested him myself. Now, tomorrow morning, find him and begin his training. I look forward to your reports."



The young man paused at the doorway, giving his eyes a chance to adjust to the low light of the room, then stepped in tentatively as his vision recovered from the bright sunlight outside.

"You wanted to see me, papa?" Rendil asked the figure seated at the table. His father, Milus, looked up from the unfolded letter he was reading and laid it on the table.

“Yes, Rendil. It appears you’re to begin your apprenticeship with the Sages Arcane. This man over there brought the news.” Rendil followed his father’s hand as it pointed to the corner of the kitchen. Seated in a chair was a man, not much older than Rendil, dressed in a green robe with white trim. “The strange thing is, my son, I don’t remember ever agreeing to have you tested. What do you know about this?”

Rendil’s face flushed under the Milus’ intent gaze. His father was not one quick to anger. However, if he directed his stare at someone, especially as he was doing now to Rendil, one knew the best course of action was to speak directly and truthfully. “Father, I—,” he stammered, looking for the right words. “I put myself up for testing. I didn’t want you to be angry.” The confession came faster now, as if it wanted to get out, to reveal the truth to earn his father’s forgiveness and acceptance. “I’m sorry, papa. It was done before—in Targonor. Then, with the fall of the city and our moving here—Well, I thought the records were lost.”

The man in the corner spoke up. “Excuse me.” Standing up, he walked to the table and took a seat opposite Milus, leaving his back towards Rendil. “Master Wainscott, I’m sorry. This is probably a lot to absorb at once. However, I want to assure you that we of the Sages Arcane are committed to teaching those talented individuals we find. Not all of those we choose make it through the process. However any person who leaves does so with an education that is suited to an array of good occupations. Many merchants, scholars, and even some clergy have passed through our preliminary training. We want what is best for the entire community.

“I know you have seen, first-hand, the danger our society faces. All of us have. The fall of Targonor damaged every level of our society. We lost many of our own Members as we defended the citizens during the flight. We have lost even more in the past couple of years striving to build this new city. I assure you, we are only doing what is necessary to sustain the Kingdom, our Kingdom.”

Milus listened as the sage continued. Rendil stood awkwardly, wishing to flee, but also wanting to hear the outcome of this conversation.

“I also want to personally guarantee the safety and well-being of your son while he undergoes his training. In fact, I am assigned as his mentor. I have recently completed my own training and will be giving my full attention to his studies. My own master, Dorrin Longreat, was the one who tested Rendil in Targonor. He has requested that I keep him apprised of the training. As you can see, Rendil’s future is of great interest to all of us.”

Milus picked up the letter again and read it. After a time, he said, "So you are Hanrick Lantier, I take it?"

"Yes, I am. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Hanrick, do you mind giving me a moment with my son?"

"Certainly, I shall wait outside." Hanrick pushed his chair away from the table and stood up, and with a quick nod to Rendil, walked through the doorway into the courtyard beyond.

"Rendil, sit please." Milus motioned to the chair opposite him, recently vacated by Hanrick. Rendil took his seat and waited for his father to continue. "I am not going to pretend I'm not angry. Your not telling me was wrong. I taught you better than that, didn't I? You know I expect honesty from you."

Rendil lowered his eyes, looking at the tabletop. "I know and I'm sorry. I should have told you. With everything that happened, in Targonor—and since we left—well I was afraid I would never get your permission."

"Son, I'd have to be both blind and daft to not know you won't be a smith. Getting you to help out in the smithy is like trying to shoe a pig. You can get it done, but when it's done, you end up tired and dirty and the pig is squealing mad. I have never expected you to follow in my steps. I just want you to be happy. Is this what you want? If it isn't, tell me and I will run this Hanrick off."

Rendil thought about that question. He'd spent his whole life searching for an answer to, "Is this what I want?" All those times he followed the Sages, even on the day he had made a mistake and been caught, Rendil had dreamed of joining the order. His desire had grown even stronger since that day, especially because of his odd and more frequent encounters with Master Longreat. Master Dorrin, as he had asked Rendil to call him, showed such an interest in him. Several times, the sage had shown him a simple cantrip or had talked to him about life as a sage. He was condescending most of the time, often downright rude. Rendil ignored such manners. He was fascinated by the sage's ideas.

One day, Dorrin had given him some books to read. Rendil had secreted them away like some ill-gotten treasure. He only brought them out when he had time to study them in privacy. Once, Elvara had caught him with one of them. She had asked what it was. He told her it was a study book from his

teacher. Elvara had nodded and said nothing, but still he thought she saw through his lie. She always did.

Rendil kept his odd relationship with Master Dorrin a secret. No one else knew about it, at least that's what he thought. A few weeks before the flight from Targonor, Master Dorrin had spoken to Rendil about the Sages Arcane. The Sage had pulled out a sheaf of notes from the pocket of his robe and said, "Who would have thought a little spy could be so talented? Oh yes! I remember our meeting, just as I know you do. It seems we are both fortunate I didn't slay you on the spot as is my habit with nosy alley skulkers. You have a great future ahead of you, Rendil. These are my notes about your tests. The world of the Sages will soon open to you."

That was the last Rendil had seen of Master Dorrin. In fact, the boy thought the Sage has perished in the terrible aftermath of the fall of Targonor. He certainly hadn't expected to find that, after all these lost years, the Sages were still interested in him.

"Well, son, what's your answer?" Milus' question jolted Rendil out of his reverie.

"This is what I wish, papa," replied Rendil.

"Very well. You best get your things packed so as not to keep the sage waiting. And make sure to stop in the smithy to tell Elvara goodbye."

Both Milus and Rendil stood up. Milus walked over to his son and embraced him. "Remember you are always welcome here."

Their embrace ended. Rendil made his way to the ladder that led to the loft above to retrieve his belongings.

"And son, always remember, I am proud of you. You don't have to impress me."

"I know, papa." Then Rendil added, "And thank you."

THE CONVERSATION

Rendil pursued his studies with the same focus and concentration he had used to master pick-pocketing in his youth. Each night, he lay awake mulling over the complex theories introduced that day and reviewing every tidbit of

overheard conversation. Thinking through a thorny problem often calmed his mind so he could finally sleep.

His days were full and his studies engrossing. A normal day began with an early meal followed by private study and a discussion with Hanrick. They usually walked together to the midday meal. Rendil would then start his afternoon in the library. Recently, his time among the books and scrolls had shortened as he found other apprentices and mentors more available for conversation. He was even allowed to sit in on some talks given by the senior sages. It wasn't long before Rendil had learned of the Sages' role in the building of New Targonor, the responsibilities of advising the Thestran Council, and even the need for proper evaluation of new candidates, among other subjects.

Rendil endured the long and tiring days without complaint and looked forward to his evening conversations with Hanrick. Hanrick would question Rendil about the day's teaching and then ask him to find ways to apply the material to his apprenticeship. Rendil felt his relationship with Hanrick strengthen during these meetings.

Hanrick was a patient teacher. He was quick to explain and would give clear reasons for doing or not doing certain actions. If Rendil became frustrated, Hanrick would change his approach and Rendil would soon find himself solving the problem from a completely different direction. In Hanrick, only five years his elder, Rendil found a confidant and friend, as well as a mentor. Hanrick's teaching methods were entirely different than the demeaning admonishments and patronizing corrections Master Dorrin used, and Rendil was glad of it.

One night at their usual meeting time, Hanrick entered the small room he shared with Rendil, and observed his apprentice sitting at the table studying the apprentice primer. Books were stacked on every part of the table. Among those books, Hanrick spied a magic treatise, a book about the Sages Arcane, a small history of the Thestran kings, and several maps.

"What's all this, Rendil?"

Rendil looked up from his books, and rubbed at his eyes. "I was just looking at these maps of Thestra and trying to determine where the undead might next appear. We all know they came up from the south when we were in Targonor. However, the mountains seemed to have stopped them." Rendil traced along the line of the Widow's Veil on the map and then used his finger to cir-

cle the deep woods south of New Targonor. "Then we have the woods here to worry about. What if they found a way t—"

"That can wait, Rendil," interrupted Hanrick. "I would like to talk a bit about your thoughts on the lecture from this afternoon. Master Gemmel had some interesting things to say, did he not? Specifically, I want to talk about the accepted practices of our art."

"Well, that's what got me started in all this," Rendil replied as he motioned to the mess of books and maps on the table. "We don't know what caused the undead to appear. We also don't know why they attacked us. Could the invasion be magical, the work of some rogue sages?"

Hanrick chuckled. "I love how your mind works. Honestly, it is refreshing to hear a completely different viewpoint that only you seem to find." He pushed aside some of the books and parchments from the edge of the table and then rested against it. "Rendil, where are these questions coming from?"

"I was reading in this history," Rendil held up the battered tome about the history of the Sages Arcane. "There were some incidents recorded that raised my suspicions."

"Rendil, let me assure you that many sages have looked into this. They have determined that the undead invasion is not magical in nature, at least in any magic we know. Whatever is behind the undead is still a mystery-- however it isn't the work of 'rogue sages'."

"What do they think it is then?"

"That I don't know, but minds more suited to the task than ours are hard at work trying to figure that out." Hanrick picked up the apprentice primer and began to thumb through it. "What I more want to talk about are the accepted practices. You have read about them in here, I assume?"

"Yes, I have. I understand the need to assist the throne, the mercantile uses of our art to maintain fair trade, the pursuit and recording of knowledge, and the accepted military uses."

"You certainly listed them, but do you truly understand them? What are some limitations or restrictions on these principles?"

"The biggest limitation the Sages' have placed on themselves is the restriction on experimentation with life," Rendil answered.

“Correct. Our art is not a healing art. We’re also not to seek wanton harm, nor are we to use torture. Why is that, you think?”

Rendil pondered the question for a moment, then replied, “Because we want to be respected for our abilities, not feared.”

“Interesting answer. It’s somewhat correct, but I want to hear more of your reasoning on this.”

“I was reading about the early days of the order and Talin the Mad and —“

“That’s an interesting choice of study,” interrupted Hanrick. “That is clearly outside the scope of your apprenticeship training this early into it.”

“I know, Master. However, it intrigues me. I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine, Rendil. You just caught me off guard. However, I do want you to clear your studies with me first from now on. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Continue then.”

“Well, Talin the Mad was put on trial and executed for human experimentation. It took the Sages many years to put that behind them—er, us.”

“Why was what Talin did wrong?”

“Because there were no controls over it. He did it on his own.”

“That’s correct but not the answer I was looking for. Why were those actions by Talin so wrong?”

Rendil sat and thought of an answer. After several moments, he was unable to come up with a plausible reason. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Although we use our magic to enhance, we do not create life, nor do we take part in necromancy,” Hanrick explained. “We leave the healing arts to the priests, who are better suited to the task. In fact, often, our arts work at cross purposes with the natural order. Talin’s use of human subjects for his experiments destroyed several lives and left others near death. His fascination with cadavers and attempts to raise up constructs put our entire society in danger. He paid with his life for violating our tenets. His actions also opened

the Sages Arcane to outside scrutiny, which almost led to our dissolution. We update our accepted practices frequently so we may stay true to our mission and don't stray into those dark areas of study again."

"But sages still theorize about it, right? They just don't act on it."

"No, they don't. I haven't heard of a single Sage who has taken up Talin's, or similar, studies."

"But they do." And then Rendil related the story of getting caught in Targonor. He talked about the theories he heard whispered. He mentioned the names of the books the two sages discussed. As Rendil continued, Hanrick's demeanor changed from one of interest to one of trepidation. At the end of the telling, Hanrick was clearly shaken.

"This happened in Targonor?" asked Hanrick. "Do you happen to remember what the sages looked like?"

"I can do one better. I can give you a name."

"You know the name?"

"You do as well," said Rendil. "It was Master Dorrin."

FIRESIDE TALES AND LEGENDS: THE BOOK OF QALIA

THE SANDS OF QALIA HAVE SEEN THE RISE AND FALL OF MANY AMBITIOUS EMPIRES. INTREPID ADVENTURERS TELL OF FANTASTIC RUINS THAT STAND AS SILENT WITNESS TO THE POWER AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE ANCIENT QALIANS. THE MORDEBI AND QALIATHARI EMPIRES HAVE SUNK BENEATH THE SEAS AND SANDS; BUT THEIR MEMORY AND THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS STILL RESONATE IN THE HEARTS OF THE NOMADS AND CITY DWELLERS ALIKE.

QALIA IS A LAND OF LEGENDS, MYTHS, AND ANCIENT SUPERSTITIONS. TALES OF GREAT WARS, GODS, MONSTERS, AND HEROES HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN SINCE BEFORE THE CATACLYSM. MANY OF THESE TALES ARE WOVEN WITH THREADS OF TRUTH; WHILE OTHERS ARE PURE IMAGINATION. MINOR HEROES HAVE BEEN ELEVATED BY THE LEGENDS, WHILE GREAT ARTIFACTS OF POWER HAVE BEEN DISMISSED AS MERE MYTHS.

THE CONTINENT IS ONE OF EXTREMES. FIERCE SANDSTORMS. HARSH SUN-BLASTED DESERTS. TITANIC MOUNTAIN RANGES THAT LOOM OVER THE DESERTS. THESE DEFINE THE LANDSCAPE OF QALIA, AS DO THE STORIES WITHIN THIS CHAPTER.

GRAY DOVE

HARQAD

In the predawn hours, the village of Khal finally surrendered the heat of the previous day. The two hours immediately before sunrise offered a brief respite, allowing the citizenry a chance to work free of sweat. Even though many of the merchants started their workday this early, Harqad usually began his day even earlier.

Born in Khal, Harqad was used to the heat. He was accustomed to the fact that even small tasks could turn into laborious undertakings in the searing temperature. No stranger to labor, his hands bore the scars of a man who had spent his life hauling on ropes and working with timber. His weather-beaten face told of countless hours endured on the open seas. He didn't sail on the large galleys like those floating in the harbor. Nor did he travel on one of the sleek, fast ships of a trading company. He sailed his own vessel, something rarely seen on the quays of Khal. He took to the seas like a sparrow to flight, an urge pushing him to travel wherever the wind might push him.

Harqad made a decent living by taking small cargos from Khal and delivering them to the tiny fishing communities speckling the northern coast of Qalia. The size of his dhow allowed him to travel where larger galleys could not. Small inlets and waterways were no hurdle for the sleek boat. Most trade to the inland settlements went overland on the backs of beasts, or more recently, drawn by large caravan wagons. But several months ago, he had made a lucrative trip east up the Qa River and made landfall just north of Mekalia, beating the best times of the caravans by days. Although the gnomes of Mekalia had been known to distrust and cheat most outsiders, Harqad received a decent sum for his cargo of linen, mostly due to his gentle nature and his skill of negotiation.

On his return to Khal, Harqad shared the story of his trip in the taverns and back trading rooms. Since then, others had tried the voyage, but only those with small vessels were matching his success. However, a small boat didn't guarantee safe passage. The way was treacherous, with a series of rapids and several narrow passages waiting for the inattentive or novice sailor. The wind also had to be favorable to sail east against the strong current as the river wound its way down from the foothills. That only happened for a few weeks of each summer.

Harqad lived decently in all meanings of the word. He was slow to anger, a gentle soul. His grandmother had nicknamed him “Dove” for his calm and serene heart. Harqad also was fortunate to be able to provide for his necessities for living. His home, though small in comparison to those of the rich sea captains of the trade fleets, sat between the city wall and a large merchant house. Its location sheltered it from the majority of the intense heat of the summer. Although not luxurious, the furnishings were comfortable and he treated them with care.

The sailor didn't hold much interest in the trappings of status or wealth. As long as he could afford to prepare meals and keep his dhow in service, he was happy. That dhow, affectionately named “The Gray Dove”, was the center of his being. His world was tied to the “Dove” whether it was fighting against the wind to deliver him and his small cargo to a safe port or a gently swaying bed he laid on to watch the stars on a clear and cool night. She was his companion on journeys, not just of physical distance, but also journeys that brought him contentment. He felt at peace standing on the slowing surging decks of planed cedar.

Harqad pulled on a simple sleeveless linen shirt and serviceable trousers. His feet, accustomed to the rigors of life at sea, were generally bare, but this morning he wore a pair of leather sandals. He kept his hair short, no more than an inch in length, and followed the practice of shaving, unlike most sailors.

His breakfast consisted of a bowl of cold porridge and a piece of flat bread. Harqad ate quickly and left for the harbor. Along the way, he could hear the activity of merchants and sailors preparing for their day from the houses and shops.

He made his way past a few merchants setting up their stall to sell freshly baked bread and produce; a quick wave to them gained him a greeting and an orange thrown in return. As he reached the docks, he heard a piercing whistle, and he turned to see Harbormaster Jalel beckoning him over to a small dockside desk

“Good morning, Harqad,” Jalel said. “Did you hear the request for traders to head to Ahgram?”

“No, I didn't. Who put the request out this time?”

Jalel leaned back in his chair, laying his arms across his prodigious belly and began to chuckle.

"That, my friend, is the humorous part. He just hasn't learned, even after all his previous failures. Qaraf is still trying to strike out on his own."

Harqad looked at Jalel. "I thought his trading license was revoked. How can he back a new venture?"

"It was. Remember, he married Fatis' widow? She retained a trading license through that marriage. Qaraf put the request out as a venture of Fatis Trading. Word spread quickly last night and traders were lining up to be part of it." Jalel chuckled. "That is, until someone named the true backer."

"That someone being you?"

"Perhaps," Jalel chortled. The huge rolling laugh brought tears to his eyes.

"My friend, don't you think you have punished him enough? It has been two years since that incident."

"Incident?" exclaimed Jalel. "It was no mere incident. He is lucky I haven't had him killed."

"Careful, you never know what eyes and ears are about," cautioned Harqad, turning to look about them.

"It doesn't matter. At least, not to me. Do you know how much he cost me? I was almost out of this job. Finally, after seven years. I had repaid my debt. I was going to sail again. Then he takes my money, my boat money, and I am stuck again."

"Well, I think you share some of that blame," Harqad said. "You did give him your money knowing his history."

"Bah, you are starting to sound like all the others!" exclaimed Jalel. "He tricked me! I still can't believe he hasn't been killed."

"So when will you feel you have gotten your revenge?"

"When he is dead."

"Perhaps that day will come soon then."

"Never soon enough." Jalel picked up his quill and began writing in his log. "Now, what can I put down for your destination today? Any cargo?"

“No cargo today,” smiled Harqad. “And as for a destination, I don't have a set one. I think I will head up the coast.”

“You sure you aren't going to join the 'Fatis venture'?”

“I wouldn't be able to pay its cost.”

Jalel looked at him, confusion showing on his face. “Cost?”

“Certainly.” A small smile broke on Harqad face. “Having to avoid the sell-swords you'd send after me for doing business with your nemesis would cost me too much sleep, my friend.” Harqad winked at Jalel.

“My friend,” the Harbormaster laughed, “you tempt fate I think. My wrath might notice you soon enough anyways.” Jalel laughed again and then waved his hand dismissively at Harqad. “Now go, get that eyesore of a boat out of my harbor.”

“The Gray Dove is a jewel. Perhaps, you forget how it allowed me to fish you out of the water last month.”

“I forget nothing,” said Jalel, waving his hands about. “Be safe, Harqad. I wait for your tales of adventure. Go with the wind.”

Harqad returned the sailors' blessing with the standard reply. “I go where the wind takes me.”

IDARA

ZULRAN'S FUNERAL: PART ONE

"It's time to go," my Father said.

With that, our journey began. Little did I know it wouldn't end when we reached our destination three days later.

We set out from Khal with one purpose; my Father's closest friend and business partner, Zulran, had died. Upon receiving word, he immediately began making plans to attend the funeral. Custom required our participation, which meant a journey to Ahgram. Father absolutely refused to travel by boat, meaning a long, dust-choked trek behind the caravans heading south along the trade roads. Worried that our business would suffer from our absence, I tried to beg off accompanying Father, but to no avail.

I don't remember when I first met Zulran. It had to have been well before I could walk. Although we were not related by blood, the strong merchant ties between us intertwined Zulran's family with ours. I often felt that Zulran was more than a kind uncle; he was really a second father and a mentor to me. Along with my Father, he taught me much in the ways of commerce, so that by the time we moved to Khal I had become an important part of my Father's business. Sadly, after that, our families drifted apart.

As we loaded our wagon in preparation for the trip, the other merchants and customers milled about. The importance my father placed in our journey was evident to everyone. He had never before closed the shop in the seven years we had lived in Khal. Even if both of us were gone, as happened occasionally, the shop had remained open. It always was open. Business first, family second, the Empire third. Except that in our case there was a wide gap between first and second priorities and an even wider one between second and third -- the empire was far beyond the dunes on the horizon.

We loaded up our wagon with gifts for Zulran's family and our own trunks, filled with our ceremonial clothing for the funeral. I tried once again to talk my Father out of requiring me to go.

"Father," I said, "Our rivals will try to gain advantage while we were gone. Our iron contracts are fragile. Our prices are a bit above the others-- we rely on our service to keep our customers."

"They will understand," he replied. "And if they don't, no matter. Our place is at this funeral." My Father deflected every other argument I put forth. After I had exhausted all my excuses, he placed his hand on my shoulder. "We must go, my son. Our faith requires us to be there. That means we both must go, not just me."

We made our way through the gate with our wagon, and headed south along the trade road. It was filled with merchants, farmers, and animals, in wagons and on foot. Although most of the traffic was heading into Khal, there was a caravan in front of us heading to Ahgram. As I added our wagon to the line, their mounted guard moved directly behind us.

The road to Ahgram is usually safe. However, because of the bandits that sometimes appear along it, caravan owners often offered security to those traveling without guards for a small fee. As the head guard rode alongside to collect the fee, I asked him if he had heard anything about the new trade routes opening with the gnomes of Mekalia.

He smiled. "My last trip was out that way. The gnomes are a stubborn lot and keep to themselves mostly but are harmless enough, for now. It also paid quite well for guard detail." I handed him a couple of gold coins as payment for protection. He nodded and rode on.

The trip was uneventful. Father spent time reminiscing about Zulran and how they started working together. I sat and listened, nodding at the appropriate places even as I wished I could be off both the wagon and the road.

On the third day, we neared Ahgram. Its high walls stood out along the horizon and loomed larger as we approached. As we made our turn west, I could make out the three gates, each with their own line of people waiting to get in. The south gate, called the Port Door because it was the one closest to the harbor, opened to the harbor district and the docks. Many of the minor merchant families, dock workers, and stall owners lived within this area. To the north was the Gate of the Sun., the Imperial Gate that only nobles or those with special credentials were allowed to use.

The trade road led directly to a large gate in the middle of the wall. The Mercantile Gate was the main thoroughfare and access point for all trade and most visitors to Ahgram. It was to this gate we were headed.

We waited in line for about an hour before reaching the entrance. The duty guard asked us our business, and if we had any goods to sell during our visit. I told him we were there for the funeral of a family friend and that we had not

packed a single crate of merchandise for the journey. He motioned us through with a bored wave and as we entered the city, I was struck by the changes since I was last there. Certainly, Ahgram has always been buzzing with activity like bees around a hive, but this time the press of people, the exotic wares, and smells assailing me from all sides was overwhelming.

Slowly, we navigated our way up the main thoroughfare. At the end of the market square, my Father climbed down from the wagon, walked up to a stall, and spoke with a merchant. After conversing for several minutes, my Father told me to follow him and proceeded on foot. Several crowded streets later, he pointed to the right, motioning for us to head down a smaller street. We followed its uneven paving until the end of that path, where my Father headed down a small alley. I turned the wagon after him, barely passing between the buildings, so closely they stood together.

The alley narrowed even more near its end, preventing us from going any further with our wagon. I climbed down to continue on foot, passing between two large warehouses. Directly in front of us, at the end of the alley, was a small house.

"There it is," my Father said. "We have arrived."

This was not the house of the great merchant Zulran, at least not that I remembered. I had always pictured Zulran as larger than life, a wealthy magnate who could buy and sell entire enterprises on a whim. Now his business was no longer envied throughout the city and he long ago ceased being a great merchant. Perhaps my view of Zulran was similar to the one I had of my Father before I grew up. As I matured, reality began to eclipse my imagination and I started to see his failures along with his successes. I had been removed from Zulran's presence for so long, though, that I hadn't gone through the same change of perspective.

We walked up to the modest dwelling crammed between the massive walls of storehouses. I was amazed the house still stood, seeing the shape it was in; unadorned, walls needing repair, and a roof that looked on the verge of collapse. It spoke of how far Zulran had fallen.

My Father knocked on the door, and in a few moments time, it opened. A young woman clothed in a simple yellow sleeveless robe with a green sash stood at the threshold, the curves of her body evident through the heavy linen. Her smooth dark hair glistened, framing her face. Full lips the color of pomegranates parted in a small smile. Her eyes, deep dark pools, pulled my

gaze to them and held it for several long moments. Time stopped, and I wanted it to never start again.

She turned to my Father and said, "Uncle, we weren't expecting you. I'm happy you made it safe."

"Thank you, Idara," my Father replied. "We belong here. We too are part of Zulran's family."

Idara. This was Idara. And that was when my world changed.

ZULRAN'S FUNERAL: PART TWO

"Won't you come in?" asked Idara.

Her words drew me from my trance. I forced myself to look away, towards the darkened room behind her.

My Father glanced at me. "What's wrong with you, my son?" he said. He laid his hand upon my arm. "You remember Idara, don't you?"

Of course I remembered Idara. However, when we had left Aghram, she didn't look like she did now.

Idara offered her hand in greeting and I hesitantly grasped it. It was cool to the touch, soft skin I wouldn't soon forget. Unconsciously, my fingers lingered over hers for several moments.

"It has been a long time, Tanir," she said smiling. "Please come in. You must be tired from your trip. I have fresh tea."

I replied with a nod. My Father spoke up. "Thank you, Idara. Please forgive Tanir his manners." He glared at me. "It appears the sun has struck him daft." He motioned for Idara to lead the way.

We entered the small house and I closed the door behind us. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw an older man seated at the table. He had the look of a magistrate, or perhaps a tax collector. He was dressed in a dark robe, and a neatly trimmed beard partially obscured the sour expression on his face. In front of him were several scrolls and a quill.

"This is Kahlil," Idara murmured, introducing her guest. "He is here to—settle my Father's accounts."

My Father sat down opposite Kahlil and pushed the scrolls away. “My friend,” my Father began, “perhaps there is a better time to balance the scales? Zulran still needs to be buried and here you are asking for payments?”

Kahlil looked at my Father, contempt smoldering in his eyes. “My duty comes first and is no concern of yours. Zulran owes much to many.” The man began to roll up his scrolls. “We are done—for now. But there are many accounts to still reconcile.”

Kahlil stood, gathered the scrolls and quill and began to place them in a bag. “I will be back after the funeral,” he sneered at Idara. “I would hope you will not be busy then.” He walked stiffly out the door.

“What a rude man!” my Father exclaimed as he stood up from the table, arms waving. “Is this what Aghram has come to? Treating a merchant like some mendicant and ignoring the mourning period?” My Father’s voice rose as did the color in his face.

Idara moved to comfort him, placing her hands on both his arms and guiding them back down to his sides. “Please don’t fret so, Uncle. Things have changed since you were last here. In so many ways.” Idara released my Father and sat down, motioning for him to join her. “My Father’s business failed some time ago. He never wanted you to know.”

“What happened, my child?” my Father asked, dismayed.

“His drive for profits trapped him,” explained Idara. “Several years ago, he began dabbling in selling spices. However, the Zephyr Trading Company already had firm control of that market.”

“But he was a linen merchant,” I said as I pulled a chair up to the table. “Why would he go up against them?”

Idara looked at me. I felt her gaze on me as she searched my face and it softened as she replied. “It wasn’t the wisest choice but he was not content with the profits of just one product. He wanted more. He always did,” she added softly.

“And?” inquired my Father. “Certainly one setback couldn’t have destroyed him. He always had reserves.”

“He did. However, this wasn’t just a mere setback. The spices he was selling were smuggled in. That allowed him to undercut Zephyr’s price.”

Idara poured two cups of tea from the pot sitting on the edge of the table and offered one to each of us. Her fingers brushed mine as she handed me my cup, and we stayed like that for several moments. She seemed lost in thought as her fingers traced along my hand and she gazed at me. When she reached my fingertips, she broke out of her reverie and pulled away, quickly smiling at me. The gentle reminder of her touch remained on my skin.

Focusing back on the conversation, she continued. “Those within Zephyr found out about the black market connections. They used their influence within the Council and early one morning, our warehouses were raided. The clerks couldn’t produce the tax writs and all the spices were confiscated.”

“No doubt they found their way into Zephyr’s stores,” my Father added dryly.

“Yes, they did,” she said, frowning. “We were also fined an exorbitant fee which we couldn’t pay. We were forced to sell all but one of our storehouses and everything within them for a fraction of their worth.” Tears welled up in her eyes. The pain, although years in the past, was still fresh to her.

“My Father died that day. Not physically, but his life ended all the same. He had nothing. His shame was so great.”

“What happened to his linen contracts?” asked my Father.

“Most of the weavers left when we ran out of coin to pay them. Without them, we couldn’t fulfill our orders.”

“Why didn’t he write me?” my Father demanded. “I had plenty of work I could have given him, especially in Aghram.”

“He was ashamed of facing you, especially after hearing so much about your success in Khal.” She then went on to tell us about how Zulran had tried to petition the Council about his situation. However, since he wasn’t born in Aghram and hadn’t paid the citizenship levy, he wasn’t allowed representation within the Council. He was allowed to be a business owner and to pay the sometimes excessive taxes that kept the city functioning, but he had no legal voice. Idara added that many of Aghram’s residents, including all the women, were in similar situations. In fact, her own schooling was cut short because she was not a citizen, despite being born in Aghram. Lately, it seemed most were awarded citizenship primarily based on their ability to pay the corrupt officials.

When we came back to the topic of money, I spoke up. “If I may ask, how much does he still owe? Can we help?” My Father glowered at me. I had overstepped my authority in asking.

“We owe more than we have,” she replied. “The day after the funeral, this house will belong to Khalil’s master.” Idara took my hands into hers. “I thank you for your offer to help. However I think it is time for me to give up this merchant life. I was never meant for it.” Idara stood, any trace of melancholy banished, and a new gleam in her eyes. “Come, let me show you your room and get you settled in. You might also want to move your wagon from the alley. Khalil could mistake it for mine.”



Later in the evening, after Father had decided to take a stroll about the city to visit some of our merchant contacts, Idara and I shared a meal at the small table. Between stolen glances at each other, we talked about the years we had been apart and she laughed at my stories, encouraging me to tell her further of my travels and life in Khal.

As we were finishing, Idara poured tea for both of us. “Tanir,” she asked, “why were you so surprised when you saw me this morning? When I opened the door, you acted like you didn’t know me.” The light of the candles reflected in her eyes. The soft glow caressed her cheeks as she gazed at me.

“I was surprised to see how you have changed,” I replied. “You weren’t as I expected.”

“Certainly, you didn’t expect to find a young girl with her hair bound up and face dirty?” She smiled. “I am no longer the child you knew running through the shops. I am long past those days of youth.”

“I remembered you as I left you,” I admitted. “A dirty young girl in the marketplace. And today, I was surprised by your beauty. But I was pleasantly surprised. I don’t think I have seen anyone more beautiful.” The color rose in my cheeks as I said the words, and I worried I had been too forward in my statement.

“You are too kind, Tanir,” she said. Even in the dim light, I was able to see her cheeks blush. “Thank you.” She gripped my hand, our fingers intertwining. “I hear words of flattery often—however, none given with more sincerity. It is wonderful to know that there are still people in this world who believe in

saying what they feel without any pretext. I am very honored by your sentiments.” She squeezed my hand and looked at me for several moments. “Besides, I was very surprised to see you as well. I can’t believe that a handsome and prosperous merchant like you would still be unmarried. Perhaps the maidens of Khal are not as clever as they are purported to be.” She grinned and a sudden thought came to Idara then. “I almost forgot. I wanted to share something with you. Do you remember the letters you wrote to my Father?”

Idara stood and moved to a small chest in the corner and opened it. She picked out a bundle of papers tied with twine and returned to the table. “He kept all of your letters. These last few years, on many nights I would come home and find him sitting at this table reading them.” Her hands ran over the letters and then she passed them to me. “I have read them as well. You were very kind to him. He took great comfort from knowing you and your father were doing well.” Sitting next to each other at the table, we opened some of the letters and I explained more details about some of the incidents I had written about. Idara made another pot of tea and the candles burned low.

Much later as we waited for my Father to return home, I asked her what she was going to do about Khalil. The visitor from this afternoon was very much in my thoughts. I still wanted to help her, but was unsure how.

Idara stood, placing her hands on the table. “It is time for me to move on,” she said firmly. “I held onto Father’s business these last years in hopes it would revive him. Now that he is gone, there is nothing left for me here.” Idara moved to the small window and looked out. I pushed away from the table and stood next to her. Watching her.

“If there is anything I – we can do for you, let me know.” I said. She turned towards me then and we lost ourselves in each other’s gaze. I placed my hand along her cheek and caressed it, letting it trail down her neck. She closed her eyes and leaned towards me, and I placed my arms around her. She turned her face to mine and our lips met as I pulled her close. The kiss ended and she ran her fingers through my hair. Our embrace ended with the sound of the door opening to admit my Father.



The next morning, we prepared for the funeral. Father and I dressed in our dark gray mourning robes after a sparse breakfast consisting of flat bread and fruit. Idara was stunning in her red robe, denoting her status as a grieving

family member. We walked to the small graveyard outside the wall of the merchant quarter. A few distant members of Zulran's family were already at the grave, standing next to an unadorned stone coffin. The priest spoke briefly, and then we lowered the coffin into the shallow grave as Idara thanked each person for attending. Many of the attendees left, but some stayed to join us for a funeral meal. Zulran's poverty didn't allow for a lavish feast but its simple fare and good wine satisfied the requirements of the ceremonial meal.

The last guests departed and Idara, my Father, and I made our way back into the city. My father had some family he wanted to visit before we returned to Khal in the morning. He asked me to join him, but I stayed with Idara. She and I spent the late afternoon in conversation. I told her more about our business and urged her to come to Khal. She was insistent on staying in Ahgram. I felt that her staying was an unwise choice and would prevent us from seeing each other.

Later that evening, I decided to make my concerns known to her in hopes of changing her mind and saving her from a life of poverty or even servitude. The slight chill of winter had settled on Ahgram that night. Ribbons of clouds wisped across the sky, sometimes obscuring the waning moon. I found Idara on the roof terrace. She had climbed out through the small window in the loft and stood on the uneven tile roof, gazing up at the stars.

I had dressed in a deep blue tunic and a pair of linen trousers. Despite the chill, Idara was wearing a green, sleeveless robe, her hair pulled back and tied with ribbons.

I came up behind her, laying one hand on her shoulder and resting the other at her waist. She leaned back into me and gently sighed, not the least bit startled by my presence.

"Do you think we have a purpose?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I replied, inhaling the honey fragrance from her hair.

"Do you think the time we have is for a purpose?"

My heart leapt in my chest. Thinking she meant the time she and I shared, I responded carefully. "I think our purpose together is something we need to find together," I replied. "That is why I came to you tonight. I want to ask for your hand in marriage."

She turned to look at me. I saw something in her eyes I couldn't mistake, and my heart fell. "Tanir, I'm sorry...I don't know what to say. I didn't mean our purpose. I meant the purpose of our lives." Gently, she placed her hand on my cheek, pulling my face to hers. She kissed me then, her eyes closing as our lips touched. The kiss ended but her hand remained on my face. "No matter how much we could both want it to be different, it can't be as you ask."

"I don't understand," I said. "I can give you your life back. The life you deserve. I know you said the life of a merchant wasn't for you, but I'm sure that's just because it's been so hard these past years. You would be part of our business." I met her eyes as I emphasized my point. "An equal part of our business."

"I know you want me to be your wife, your partner, and to leave Ahgram. Part of me desires that as well," she said. "I could never lie to you and tell you different. You mean a great deal to me, but I don't need saving. You aren't the first man to come to my door trying to save me."

"It isn't like that!" I stammered.

"I know, Tanir," she said as she embraced me. "But I have something I need to do here. What has gone on in Ahgram needs to stop. I want to stop what happened to my father from happening again. And it isn't something you can help me with." I felt her tears as they rolled onto my tunic, soaking the shoulder, and my own eyes welled up. "You don't see the inequalities."

"I see the problems," I said. "You told me what happened to you but it's different in Khal." Our embrace ended as we stood looking at each other.

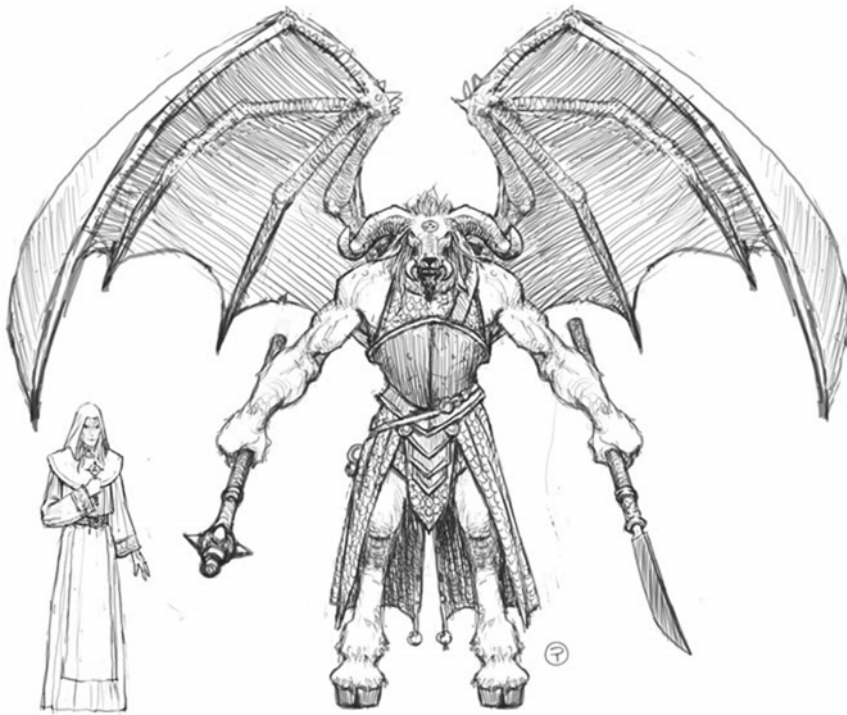
"That's part of the problem." She reached out and cautiously touched my eyes. "You see with these. What you don't see with is this," she said as she touched my forehead, "and this," resting her hand over my heart. "Your life is too different now to really know. You haven't seen the suffering, the injustice done to so many. You can't see it from where you are now and because of what you are—a citizen."

Her words, although hurtful, rang true. I didn't know the life she talked about. My life, even when we lived in Aghram, was a different experience. We had always been citizens and took many of the privileges citizenship afforded for granted. I could only nod, stunned at her words, her rejection of my offer.

“Tanir,” she said. “Don’t despair.” She wiped a tear from my cheek. “You live in my heart. Perhaps when my task is finished, things can be as we want.”

The rest of the evening we spent together, savoring the time we had remaining. Laughter replaced the tears shed earlier and I opened myself to hearing more of her thoughts about our society and her desire to change them. The candles were almost out when Father came in, to find us sitting close at the table. He hugged both of us in turn and promised Idara his support.

The next morning, we left for Khal. Idara escorted us to the gate where we said our farewells. I promised her I would be back. And someday I will. Idara’s fight is not one she should face alone.



KINGDOM OF SAND

CHAPTER II

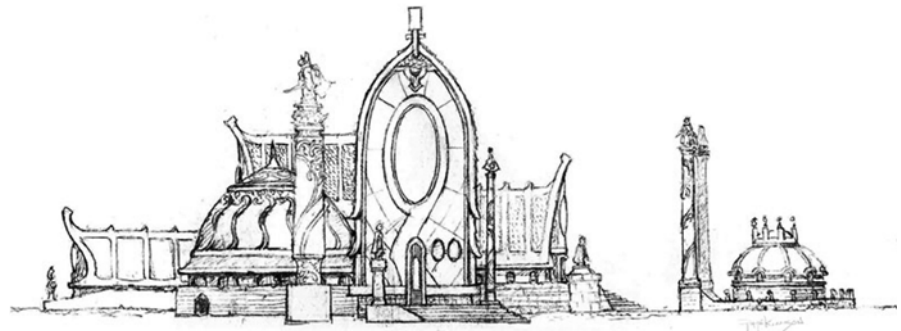
The scent of death and decay permeated the air, and the guide muttered ancient wards as he led Faratuk deeper into the tomb. Hours passed as they navigated the forgotten halls, and to their horror they found a Sword Maiden waiting for them in the burial chamber. Faratuk cried out as the warrior gave a fanged smile, drew her massive blade, and slew the guide by splitting him down the middle. With colder laughter she turned and raised her bloody sword to Faratuk, who fled in terror.

CHAPTER VI

Sweat covered his brow and an icy chill rose up his spine despite the heat. It was time. Faratuk entered the tent of the Seer and knelt before her. His heart pounded with fear as he waited for her to speak. It seemed hours later when the ancient Seer spoke in a voice laced with amusement: "So you wish to learn the true power of the mind? You have a long way to go, boy."

CHAPTER XI

Faratuk stumbled half-blind to the edge of the clear, pristine pool in the middle of the oasis. He fell to his knees and plunged his head into the cool, placid water, drinking deeply and welcoming the brief reprieve from the unrelenting heat of traveling through the sandy dunes. Having drunk his fill he pulled back, gasping for air, and as his eyes refocused, they widened in horror. In the middle of the pool was a massive creature formed of the water itself gazing balefully at him. Staggering to his feet, Faratuk turned and ran back into the wastes.



MATEEN'S HISTORIES

QALIATHARI EMPIRE

Mazhar Mateen sat quietly at his favorite table. As his aged hands carefully turned the page of the fragile looking tome set out before him, a faint grin touched his weathered old face. There were few things he enjoyed more now than taking up residence in the royal library of Ahgram for the day. He'd seen much in his many years. A lifelong scholar, his studies had taken him to nearly every corner of Qalia. Now though, he was content to live a quieter life. It was peaceful in the library, and it suited him well.

The old man felt a weak tug on his simple robes. Glancing down next to him, he saw a young boy stood at his side. "Sir?" the boy asked.

Mazhar frowned slightly, his dark brow creasing. He looked around the room, hoping to spot the boy's guardian. A few other robed men sat scattered throughout the area, each seemingly lost in their studies. There did not appear to be anyone looking for the child.

"Yes?" Mazhar replied.

"Are you the librarian?"

Mazhar smiled, and scratched at his short, scraggly white beard for a moment, then replied. "No, I am not."

"Oh," the boy said. "What are you looking at?"

"I am reading a history."

"About what?"

"Trees."

The boy nodded. "Oh," he said, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"Do you like history?" Mazhar asked in a serious tone, as he set his book aside.

The boy shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" the old man asked, "How is that?"

"Because I don't know any history," the child explained.

"I see," Mazhar said, nodding, "Well, we can't have that, can we?"

The boy looked confused and gave him a peculiar look. "Can we?"

The old man chuckled quietly. "No, we can't. Tell me, what is your name?"

"Erol, sir."

"Well young Erol, it is a pleasant thing to meet you. I am Mazhar. Now," he said, with a slight twinkle in his eye, "pick a place and I shall give you its history."

Erol's face brightened a bit. "Any place at all?" he asked.

Mazhar nodded.

The boy thought hard for a moment. "How about here?"

"Ahgram?" the old man replied. Erol nodded.

"An excellent choice." Mazhar said, leaning back as the boy took a seat. "There is more to our city's history than most know of. You are in for a treat."



"Our great city has a history rich with heroes and wrought with disaster. It is often said, that without one you cannot have the other. Ahgram, as we know it, has stood proudly amidst a land in turmoil for hundreds of years. Empires have rose and fallen, the world around us has changed and we have been challenged countless times but no matter the threat, we have prevailed.

"But our story begins long ago," Mazhar continued, as the boy settled, an eager grin on his face. "...Long before the great rift was torn, Qalia was a much different place. Two vast human empires competed for dominance. The proud Qaliathari and the noble Mordebi - two peoples with strikingly similar hopes and goals but who sadly remained unable to work as one."

"Why?" Erol asked.

The old man leaned back in his chair and gave the boy a contemplative look for a moment. "Perhaps while they both had similar goals they, as a people, were simply too different. The Mordebi came from various tribes scattered throughout the west. After many years, they banded together and began to build cities. However, change did not come quickly for the Mordebi.

"The Qaliathari were a slightly fairer skinned people who constructed some of the largest and most magnificent cities the lands had ever known. They were by all accounts more advanced than the Mordebi. So it is ironic that in the end, it was war that kept the two people apart -- not against one another but a civil war within the Qaliathari Empire."

"What were they fighting about?" the boy asked.

"A great many things," Mazhar explained, "They fought amongst themselves frequently. Though much of it culminated in one particular war.

"Shidreth Ahgramun, ruler of the Qaliathari Empire was slain by a Vizier named Jathred Shazarethen. Many viewed Ahgramun as a despot and with the support of the lower classes and the powerful sorcerer Khelium Ak'Zel, Jathred had planned to assume command of the empire after the coup. Khelium, however, turned on the Vizier after Shidreth was killed.

"Further complicating the situation for the Vizier were Ahgramun's sons. Upon hearing the news of their father's death, they banded together to avenge him. Many of the empire's nobles backed the sons, as they had the 'legitimate' claim to the throne.

"A third faction then arose in support of the sorcerer Khelium Ak'Zel. Khelium believed only the most intelligent should be entrusted to lead the empire and many mages and sorcerers of substantial power rose up in his support.

"The resulting war raged on for years. Thousands upon thousands of lives were lost and many of the Qaliathari's great cities were destroyed during these times of strife. Many of the dangerous creatures from the southlands, once kept at bay by the imperial army, again made their way into the empire's lands. The Mordebi wisely chose to stay distant from their neighbors during these years."

"Who won the war?" Erol asked eagerly.

"Nobody wins in such a war, young Erol," Mazhar replied, smiling patiently, "but in the end, Fassethi Ahgramun, eldest son of Shidreth

regained control of the empire. Vizier Shazarethen and the sorcerer Khelium Ak'Zel were put to death, along with their followers."

The boy's eyes widened. "All of them?"

The old man nodded seriously. "Just about, yes. It was a very unpleasant time in our history. Fassethi's first act as leader of the Qaliathari Empire was to rename it the Ahgramun Empire and he began construction on a new capitol city, which he called Ahgram."

"That's us!" Erol chirped excitedly.

Mazhar grinned at the boy, and shook his head slightly. "But there is much more to our story, for it was not the Ahgram you and I live in today."

"Then what happened?"

"The empire could not withstand another prolonged civil war. Fassethi was not like his father, and he knew this. He instead concentrated on rebuilding the imperial army and driving back the beasts, which had begun to invade his land. The citizens of the Ahgramun Empire soon grew to love their leader and he ruled over the beginning of an age of prosperity for his people. For many generations his descendants lead the empire justly and fairly. But as with all things, it would not last..."

AHGRAM

"The Breaking?" Erol asked quietly.

Mazhar nodded. "Civil wars and conflicts with other races scarred the will of even the strongest, but it was not until the sea rose to swallow the Mordebi and Ahgramun Empires that they were truly tested. Earthquakes ripped through the lands, tearing the earth apart. Homelands were split asunder and dragged into the dark water as giant waves reached out from the sea, snatching the very life from all they touched.

"The entire face of Qalia was dramatically altered and much land was lost. On the western coast, the rising water and sinking land resulted in the disappearance of pristine white beaches forever. The dense wilderness now met with the sea, forming a nearly impenetrable wall.

"In a violent earthen shift, the plains in the east plunged hundreds of feet below water. The lush northlands, home to the human empires were perhaps

hit the hardest. No amount of force could have saved the humans from the massive waves that swept across their lands." The boy listened intently as Mazhar continued. "The initial waves claimed every living thing from the coast to the desert and in the earthquakes that followed, more continued to smash the fertile land until it eroded entirely, leaving only desert scrublands to border the sea.

"The human empires were devastated. What few survivors remained had no homes, no food and no hope. With nowhere else to go, remnants of the Mordebi and Qaliathari empires took to the wastes to the south. They formed small clans and wandered constantly through the desolate lands, frequently warring with other clans for food and water."

"Why couldn't they just farm?" Erol asked.

"They tried." Mazhar replied. "They tried very hard. But the land was barren and the damage caused from the Breaking would take years to heal. Gradually, a number of modest settlements began to form. Some did eventually take to farming, though their crops were meager. Other settlements served merely as resting points between raids. What little ruins remained of the old Ahgramun capital were hit constantly for supplies."

The boy started to say something, but stopped himself short. The old man looked down at Erol. "What is it?" he asked kindly.

The boy shook his head. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I don't mean to interrupt again, but why didn't they just build the old city back up instead?"

"Never apologize for asking questions," Mazhar said with a grin. "That's how you learn. And some did try to rebuild the city that was lost, but the unfortunate truth is that there were too many others determined to work against them for reasons only they will ever know." He stopped, noting the somewhat disappointed look on Erol's face. "However," the old man continued, "after many years of failed attempts, several groups of Mordebi nomads forged an alliance and began to construct a permanent settlement in the tumultuous Gahren Plains."

Mazhar paused for a moment as the boy brightened up, then continued. "For several years, it looked as if they might actually succeed. But one day a violent earthquake shook the city and dragged it back down beneath the earth. The distraught Mordebi clans took this as a sign that they had angered the Gods and returned to their nomadic lifestyles."

"What do you think, Mahzar?" the boy asked, grinning.

The old man returned the grin. "I think," he began, "that perhaps the Mordebi were a bit too superstitious. Quakes such as the one that struck them were not entirely uncommon in the century following the Breaking."

"Why is that?"

Mazhar leaned back in his chair, a contemplative look on his face. "Well," he began, "imagine that you drop a large rock into the river. What happens?"

"It makes a splash," the boy answered confidently.

"Indeed it does," the old man nodded, "but after that splash, does the water not continue to ripple for a time afterwards?"

Erol frowned and thought for a moment. "I understand what you are saying now," he said finally. "The earth was still healing."

A smile spread across Mazhar's lips. "Very good," he said. "And in the years that followed, the human tribes were once again plunged into perpetual war with one another. Thousands died as the clans raided rival settlements.

"It was during one such raid that a young Mordebi boy named Bahman Fendir witnessed his father, the clan's chief, and three of his uncles brutally slain at the hands of Qaliathari invaders. The boy was badly wounded, but despite the loss of his left hand, he managed to stay alive. For many weeks, he lay sick and feverish in a makeshift tent while those around him made a meager attempt to rebuild what had been destroyed. Gradually, he regained his strength until finally... he emerged from his tent as the new chief of the clan."

"Then did he get revenge?" the boy asked, rocking back and forth on the floor.

"At first, that was all he wanted," Mazhar answered. "He swore he would avenge the death of his father and uncles, and that those who had a hand in their killing would pay dearly. His clan was weakened though, and in no shape for another war. Instead, Bahman decided to rebuild their village, and wait... for raiders would come again."

"And they did, didn't they?"

"The young chief proved to be right," the old man said, nodding. "It took only a few short years for a group of marauders to sweep into the village. In those years, Bahman had grown into a large, powerful man and his clan had become strong. This time, they were ready and they fought back. When all was finished, not a single raider was left alive. Convinced that his tribe was strong enough, the chief decided it was time to repay those who had slain his father all those years ago.

"They started with wandering raiding parties, attacking during the night while many were asleep and killing them to the man. In their wake, they left a trail of devastation."

Mazhar, much to the delight of Erol, went on to describe many of the fierce battles, making special note to not say anything too disturbing to the young boy. "For several months," he said, "this continued. Even with only one hand, the Bahman was a fearsome warrior. He continued to gain power as rival after rival fell to his attacks.

"Then, one night while planning a raid, one of Chief Fendir's scouts returned to him with news. He had located a village several of the defeated raiding parties had originated from. With their warriors all dead, the village was defenseless."

The excited look began to fade somewhat from the young boy's face. "What did they do?" he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"The decision was not a hard one for Bahman to make, and plans were quickly made to attack the village."

"Attack the village?" Erol said, taken aback. "Why? I thought you said they were defenseless?"

"They were, and you said it yourself young Erol: Fendir wanted revenge. The following night," Mazhar continued as the boy took on a look of disgust, "the chief and his clan swept into the village. The ensuing battle was short and one sided, and very violent. As the sun rose, Bahman walked through the broken wreckage of the village, searching for anyone left alive. In one small hut, he found a young boy huddled frightened in a corner."

Now Erol looked angry. He said nothing, but sat firmly planted on the floor in front of the old man, a deep frown creasing his brow. Mazhar continued.

"The boy grasped a small blade tightly in his shaking hand as Bahman drew his sword and approached. As the fearsome chief drew nearer, he closed his

eyes and looked away, seemingly resigning himself to his fate. He hoped for a quick death—.”

“—I don’t like this story anymore,” Erol said bitterly.

The old man gave the young boy a reassuring smile. “You didn’t let me finish,” he chided gently. “The boy wished for a quick death...but it never came.”

Erol perked up a bit at that. “Oh?”

“Instead, the boy heard a soft thud in the sand next to him. He opened his eyes to see the chief’s weapon lying on the ground. Bahman looked down at the boy, deathly pale as he realized what he was about to do. He had become what it was he had set out to destroy.”

“No fair!” Erol exclaimed. “You knew that was going to happen.”

Mazhar grinned and continued the story. “He left the hut with the boy in his arms and his sword still on the ground. From that point on Bahman had a new goal. Rather than conquer, he would unify. You will like this part, young Erol—the chief established a permanent settlement in the ruins of the old Qaliathari capitol and named it Ahgram, in honor of the ancient city that had once stood there.”

“Did it last this time?”

The old man nodded. “Indeed, it did. He offered protection to all of those who sought it, and established a trained militia to defend it against raiders and marauders. Before long, Ahgram had begun to resemble a small city. Trade between it and the surrounding settlements began to flourish, even with the presence of bandits and rogue groups who would take years to dig out. But by the time Bahman Fendir died, Ahgram was clearly the seat of human power.”

“What happened after he died?” the boy asked.

“The chief never had never married, nor had he ever fathered a child – but he did leave an heir who would become the first king of the new city.”

Erol scratched his head, confused. “How is that possible?”

Mazhar flashed a quick, wily grin. “I’ll leave you to figure that one out.”

TONIC

PART ONE

Nelon furrowed his brow in irritation as he fumbled with the scattered vials and bottles on his alchemic mixing table. He was just unable to concentrate at all today; the laboratory was a complete mess from last night's attack, and so was he. He wore a surprisingly clean ivory-colored cloak—a sharp contrast against his ebon skin—with a rumpled white button-up shirt and faded brown trousers tucked into dark leather boots. His normally well-groomed shoulder-length black hair was mussed and his usual bright-eyed gaze, now dull from lack of rest, scanned the alchemic workshop mournfully.

The dark wood walls were still stained with random chemicals and the room's air reeked of spilled fluids. All the glass had been swept up from the wood-board floor this morning, and the two chairs by the laboratory table were back in their proper place. The cedar desk on the other side of the room, opposite of the door and away from the lab area, was still in good condition. His attacker hadn't gone that far to find what she was looking for.

With a sigh, Nelon fell into his chair; leaning back wearily, he dragged his fingers through his hair. He was exhausted from dealing with the lab cleanup. Sweeping up glass and mopping chemicals wasn't fun, but tallying costs to replace each broken vial or damaged ingredient was even worse.

To make matters worse, the city's guards were no help. The guard that had arrived to examine the crime scene barely paid attention to him when he tried to explain what happened—after all, she had sneered, you've only been robbed of one formula. They had no idea how important that recipe was! Their apathy had forced Nelon to put out a call for some private help in finding his stolen goods. The whole situation was very time sensitive; he needed a response soon, before the secret of his encrypted formula was revealed.



"I think this is the place," Joley said quietly, her dark brown eyes scanning the surroundings out of habit. It was evening in Ahgram, and shadows fell thickly from the nearby looming structures. Completing her cursory look around, she moved lightly up the stone steps to the sturdy wood door of the building in front of her. Though fairly young for a gnome, she was still an adult—the way her athletic frame moved spoke of years of training. She was

clad in a white cotton shirt, brown leather vest, cloth breeches, leather vest and worn boots. A plain, curved short sword was sheathed on her left hip, an identically styled dagger on her right. Her attitude and attire projected practical competence.

Rold frowned as the other gnome made her way up to the door. "This seems like a lot of work for little profit." He sighed. "But at least it'll keep us busy and fed until the heat dies down."

Rold was a little bit older than Joley, and his great mind for planning was obvious in his immaculate appearance. His straight, coal-colored hair brushed his ears and was held back with a crimson headband, accenting his onyx eyes and perfectly-groomed goatee. His simple clothing hung loosely on his thin form: a long-sleeved red shirt, gray trousers, and polished black boots. A slender cudgel hung freely from his belt, swinging a little with each movement he made.

Joley rapped on the door with her knuckles; the two gnomes exchanged a glance as they waited patiently for the entrance to open. After a moment, it did, and the duo looked up at a tall, thin human in a white cloak.

Nelon blinked once, and looked down at them. "Yes? May I help you?" he asked politely.

Rold stepped up, and threw himself into a deep, exaggerated bow. "I am Rold Dakavstan, and this is Joley Poral. We are excellent at tracking and information gathering, and saw your request for help posted at one of this city's fine establishments. You are the alchemist, who suffered an unfortunate theft, are you not?" The gnome finished his bow, and looked up at the human.

Nelon smiled widely, suddenly very interested in his new guests. "Why yes, that would be me. Nelon Issan is my name. I'm pleased to get such a quick response. Come in." He pushed the door open wider to admit the two gnomes and ushered them inside. Leading them into the laboratory proper, he dragged over the two wooden chairs for them, and encouraged them to sit. Joley and Rold slid into the chairs easily despite their size, both smiling easily and looking at the human. The alchemist, leaned back in his chair, and started to speak.

"Well, it all happened last night. I was working late, putting the finishing touches on my newest alchemic formula. Suddenly, there was a loud crash and my door was flung open. A brutish individual came in, started destroying

my poor lab, and knocked me out. When I awoke, I notified the city guards and took inventory. The only thing that was missing was the recipe for the new tonic I created,” Nelon finished with a shake of his head. “I need it back fast, and the guards don’t understand.”

The two gnomes exchanged another look, and then Joley spoke slowly with one raised eyebrow. “This ... formula must be very important. So what did the attacker look like?”

Nelon smiled grimly. “Well, she was female; I could discern that from her voice. She had the look of those Lomshir folk from the southeast. She was swathed in a heavy tan cloak and a face-wrap so I couldn’t see much else about her. Oh, yes, she also carried a huge sword. I was afraid she would hit me with it.”

Rold looked thoughtful for a moment, and then waved a hand dismissively. “Obviously she was after that specific formula. Someone knew about it. Who have you told? Do you have any enemies?”

Nelon looked surprised for a moment. “Enemies? No, no I don’t think so.” A thoughtful look crossed the human’s face. “In fact, I had nothing but excited interest when I told everyone about my discovery last night at The Desert Flower. I didn’t tell them what it did though, of course.”

Joley sighed, and shook her head. “Brilliant. Who was listening to you? Was there anyone that seemed extremely interested?”

“Well, a few people did,” Nelon commented, frowning a bit. “Come to think of it, I might have seen that woman who attacked me in there that night. I wasn’t really paying attention, but there were a few strong-arms drinking at the bar. I can’t imagine what someone like her would want with it though.”

Rold stroked his goatee thoughtfully. “True, but she might think it’s worth some money to the right person. And perhaps she knows someone who could use it. We know where The Desert Flower is, that should be our first stop in checking things out.” Joley nodded in agreement, and the two gnomes hopped off their chairs and started for the door.

“Do you really think you can get my formula back?” Nelon slowly rose from his seat, his gaze following them hopefully.

Joley looked back with a wry grin, and shook a finger at the alchemist. “Don’t worry about it. We’re very good at getting what we want from people.”





THERE IS SOMETHING TELLING IN THE PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE. WE CATCH GLIMPSES OF THE AUTHOR'S MIND AS WELL AS THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RECEIVING PARTY. THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS LETTERS OF VARYING LENGTHS. SOME STAND ALONE, OTHERS ARE COLLECTIONS OF LETTERS THAT ARE PRESENTED TOGETHER AS A LARGER STORY.

THE ABANDONED SOLDIER

PART 1

Father,

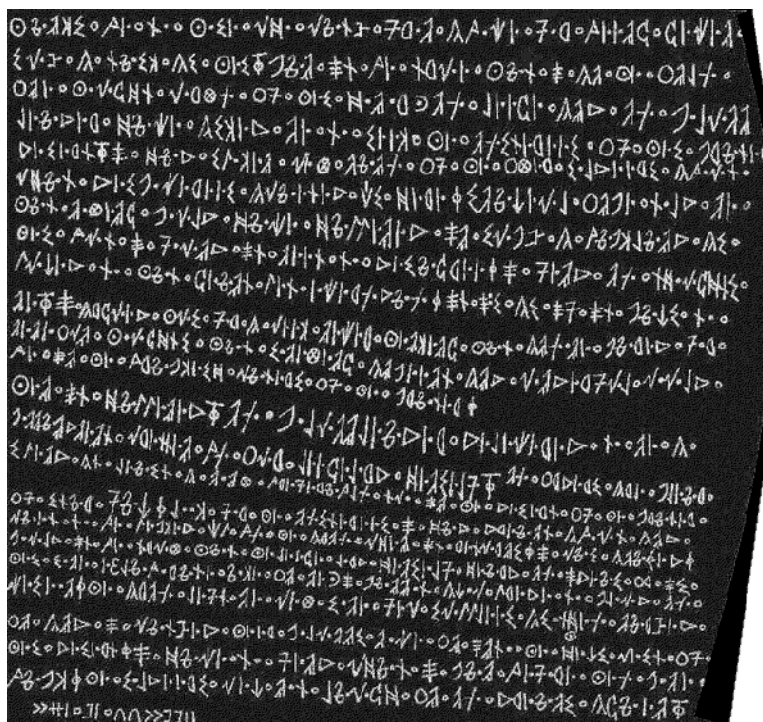
I am thankful to have heard from you again. Rest assured that I am watching my back as well, though I sense no threat from the people here. The humans in the area seem unconcerned with my questions of their past, making clear that they have only lived here for little more than two centuries – well recorded in our histories.

The halflings hold their secrets very closely, however. While gold can loosen their tight fists somewhat, the word is out about my interests. I have always heard of these folk as simple and friendly, but when conversation turns to the Fallen Star, they close their mouths and no gold will open them again.

I tell you this so you understand the difficulty I have gone through to get this latest series of documents. Again, these are from before the Cataclysm, but they seem to be from what you have called the “Old Thestran” language family. If I recall, you stated that Old Thestran books come from a time of wars between great empires. Each empire had their own script, and none seem to have been deciphered as of yet. This particular series of pages were bound between two leaves of forged iron preserved in beeswax.

As before, the copyist made a copy for me, and I am sending you the originals.

Your faithful son



Part One Translation ("Boogenhagen" of the Official Vanguard Forums): Thanks be to those who watch from above for being given such a task as this. Can it be true that I am the only one thought worthy of this honor? My liege and my column leader have asked me to seek the mysteries of this crater desert. I had spoken with many of the other soldiers about what discoveries awaited us here. Smaveul(?) once told me that nothing could have happened in such a backland as this but I found it meet to disagree. I find my thoughts pulled to that giant pit every day. It is as if it calls to me. I argued thus for a week never thinking that anyone cared for my own thoughts that something ancient and wonderful would be in the brackish waters of the crater.

Then it happened. My columnleader delivered to me a commandment written by our liegelord himself. My orders are clear spend at least a month preferably two In the desert of the crater of star fall. Look for the mysteries I had dreamt about and wait to be picked up by the army when it returns. I was amazed. Could it be truth that the liege lord himself heard my ideas or is this some elaborate joke on me? I cannot allow pride to cloud my vision. The army left me with some few supplies as they marched on and I watched their columns move on into the hills west of this desert. I have to find what I can before they come back. The soldiers will not laugh on my dreams again.

PART 2

Father,

I can't help but think sometimes I am missing something important. What began as a search for clues to our past here on Thestra has taken a darker turn. At times I fear I have lost my grip on what is true, yet, at others, I begin to understand that perhaps I am the sole holder of a truth that has been hidden from us.

Two of my associates have disappeared. We had begun work on a second message drawn on this fabulous silky cloth. Upon cleaning and preparing the scroll, they excused themselves. An hour later, we looked for them, turning up nothing. Their personal effects are still here, but of them, we have heard nothing.

Despite this alarming setback, we continue as though nothing has happened. It is important that we not show our troubles to our hosts. The people here in the village always keep watch upon us – as I have said before. The mayor, a halfling fellow named Grimbo, actually asked us point blank if we could leave the village and find some other place to stay. After paying him some few shillings, he left again, but I fear he will return with more demands.

I note your silence again. Is one letter from you all I will receive out here?

Your faithful son



Part Two Translation ("Zenya" and "Boogenhagen" of the Official Vanguard Forums):
A week has passed. My camp is made and my supplies are well hidden. While no one seems to have ever visited here I deem it nu-s-n to fall back on my training as a soldier and prepare a defensible camp. This desert is many days in any direction and the crater itself spans a dozen leagues but I still seek my own safety as first in my mind. My solitude is absolute. It makes me wonder if I have not been honored but abandoned instead. Though, instead of nattering on about my fears and my camp I should relate my fist great find. The fallen star crater which is commonly thought to be a shallow muddy lake is actually as dry as a dragon's heart. From afar the action of sun on the dry ground has created an illusion greater and stronger than that any smallfolk illusionist could conjure forth. There is no water in the crater but glass. The crater is made of glass and the sunrays make it seem as muddy water from afar.

Looking back on yesterday's words I know what thoughts you must have. This craterglass is not the glass our blowers back home make but a rough black and green glass that forms in large flowing drifts like a river turned to black ice. Sometimes in my dreaming mind I can imagine that the glass may have been made from the very rock itself. Imagine such a thing as that.

In the center of this crater is -----, I will write more on this later.

CHRONICLE OF THE SHILDBEARER

PART 1

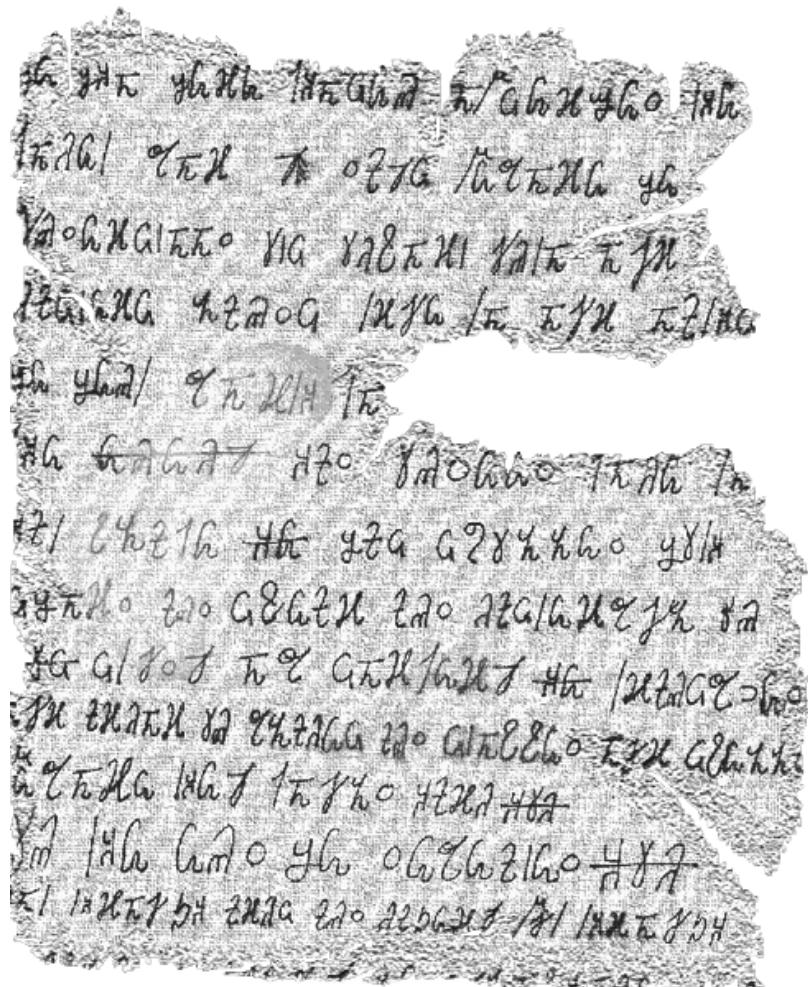
Father,

I completed the journey a week ago, but, as you have asked of me, I have not written to you until I have found something of worth.

I know that you have long thought on a language that is older than any that we have seen prior to the Cataclysm, and I believe I have found it for you. Six scrolls, held bound in ancient leather and bronze, had thin sheets of hammered brass in between the leaves. The lettering upon them was faded red and limned in places with gold ink that flaked off before our eyes. The scrolls were recovered from the lake near Tursh here in the west.

I had the copyist reproduce the fragments so we can both begin our study. I am sending you the originals as I write this. I look forward to your letter with your thoughts on translation.

Your faithful son



Part One Translation ("Lycrist" of the Official Vanguard Forums): We who were chosen observed the comet for ? days before we understood its import unto our masters lands. True to our oaths we went forth to ... The -enemy- had indeed come to that place. -He- was skilled with sword and spear and masterful in -his- study of sorcery. -He- transfigured our armor in flames and stopped our spells before they could harm -him-. In the end we defeated -him-, not through arms and magery but through...

PART 2

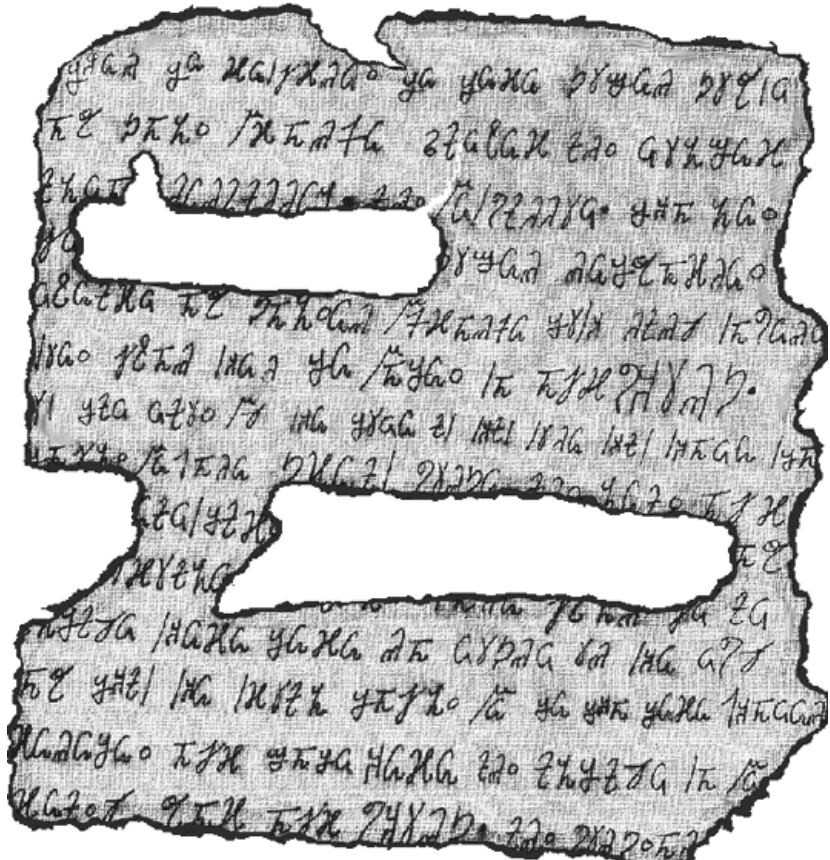
Father,

We've made progress on the scrolls here. I am concerned that I have not heard from you, but I work on, knowing that you will contact me when you will. We have begun identifying the vowels. Luckily, this language seems to be much like our own. Scrys into the weft of these words has given us some knowledge of the thoughts of the writer. Alchemical work has told us more of the age of these scrolls. Ancient does not begin to explain the age of this script, which I am calling Precursor.

It is certainly an alphabet, which means this is not the oldest writing that can be. We know the picture writing we have found is much older. That said, this Precursor script very well could be the origin of the script we use today. We call this alphabet "Alefbasah," after the likely sounds of the first three letters.

Language back then was similar to our language now. We have diverged and come together. I think we will soon be able to read these ancient words.

Your faithful son



Part Two Translation ("Fossa" of the Official Vanguard Forums): When we returned we were given gifts of gold bronze jasper and silver also Menjammel and Betkammis who led -us-----given new formed spears of golden bronze with many tokens tied upon them we bowed to our khing it was said by the wise at that time that those two would become great kings and lead our -eastward-----of- -trials-----will come upon us as always there were no signs in the sky of what the trial would be we who were chosen renewed our vows here and always to be- ready for our khing and kingdom

PART 3

Father,

Something eludes us, and someone - or something - has taken an interest in our work here. We stare bloodshot at these papers, and a voice seems to taunt us to find their secrets. We have used magic again to divine some of the letters, but they swim before our eyes when we try to think about their meaning. I understand the ancient words - but a force from without seems to sand my thoughts down to nothing when I think on them.

The people here are beginning to look at us askance. The sun shines, the flowers bloom, the people laugh, but all quiets when I go outside to see the day.

Surely you have encountered such things in your travels, father. Will you not send a word to your son to comfort him?

Your faithful son

[illegible]

Part Three Translation ("Kalthanan" of the Official Vanguard Forums): Our Khing sent we who were chosen forth with the heroes Menjammel and Betkammiss to determine the source of the fireglow to the east. With thunder it came as the comet in the sky left us the fireglow was bright like the moon but golden like the sun and burned on the limb of the heavens. Every night we travel(ed) for _ and 20 days east until we reached the hill lands of the dwarfmen. They too claimed this glow as a mystery and joined a party of their people with our party until we rode with _ and 70 men and our pack train stretched _ flights of the sky. We ...

PART 4

Father,

I had a dream of someone speaking in tongues. It spoke in rhythm to my heartbeat, reciting the Alefbasah.

It spoke, “Alef, bah, sah” and I saw a boy, no older than a dozen years, holding a writing stick covered in ink.

I heard more words, “deef, ee, fa...” and my dreams beheld a comet-filled sky.

“Gell, ha, ai...” and I saw a man ten feet tall sweep aside warriors with little thought.

“Jah, klef, lahn...” and the comet crashed to the earth.

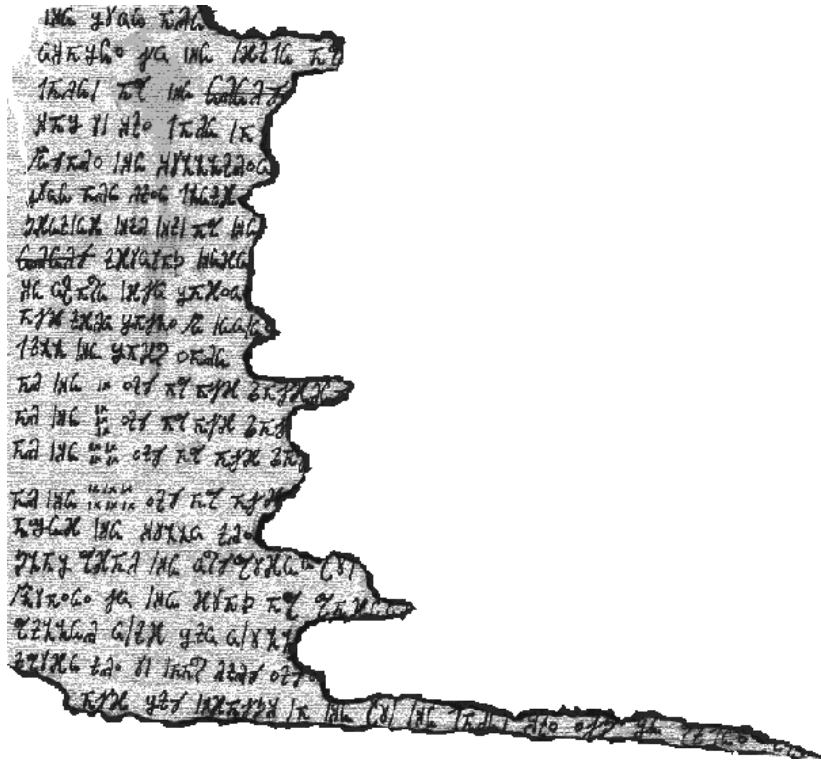
“Miin, noon, oh...” misshapen men walked from the crater.

“Pa, qaaf, ra, seef...” and my eyes were blinded with fire.

“Ta, oon, vef, waw, kha, yosh, zeef...” I awoke.

I fear to sleep again. Why do you not write?

Your faithful son



Part Four Translation ("Kalthanan" and "Tanai" of the Official Vanguard Forums):
 The Wise One-----showed us the trace of-----comet of the Enemy-----how it had come
 to-----beyond the hill lands-----Wise One made clear-----greater than that of the Enemy
 arising there-----He spoke true words-----Our arms would be tested-----call the work
 done-----On the _ day of our journey-----On the _ day of our journey-----On the _ day
 of our journey-----On the _ day of our journey-----over the hills and-----glow from the
 skyfire-pit-----blinded us the ring of fires-----fallen star was stillafire and it took many
 days-----our way through to the pit the comet had dug we faced-----

PART 5

Father,

A messenger has acknowledged you are receiving my letters, but you are allowing no one else to speak with you. I can do nothing now but trust you are doing what you feel is right. I continue to send you the originals of these scrolls, and only hope you will write me when you can.

I am still having dreams... dark and wonderful dreams like the one in my last letter. I see a bright shield, like the symbol of a number eight, and a spear that shines golden in the sun. The man who holds it, Menjammel, is hearing whispers. Dark whispers. The other man, Betkammis, hears those whispers too. I think maybe if I listen, I too can hear those whispers...

I cannot abide not hearing your thoughts on our work! I almost seek to leave this place and go home again. I am compelled, however, as you know I would be. We will not rest until these words from our forefathers are revealed.

Your faithful son

[illegible]

Part Five Translation (“Zenya” of the Official Vanguard Forums): With the dwarfen sacrificed [sacrifced] and Menjammel and Betkammi lost in the flames, we who remained journeyed [journeyued] home. It took us 100 days to travel home and the glow behind us died in that time. Some of us told the others that Menjammel and Betkammi defeated the -foe-, but many of us were lost in spirit and certain that the glow had quieted of its own measure. The journey through the hills again was [were] difficult and the dwarfen who dwelt there had [dad] been driven away by the -pitenemy- and their cavehome put to fire. When we returned to the homeland our Khing lay dead and many of our people scattered and lost. Those who dwelt within the pit of sky fire had come to our lands and killed all they could find. We gathered those who would follow and travelled east again as the -dread- -enemy- of the pit had continued on to the west. We who remained armed ourselves well in fear of those who dwelt within the pit, but we saw none of those.

PART 6

Father,

This is the final scroll, and my final letter to you from this place. Words fail me as I contemplate my fears for your safety, and thus I have decided to defy your wishes and go to you tomorrow in New Targonor. The people here look at us strangely, and I know that they have sent riders to the King in New Targonor to have you investigated and the scrolls I have sent to you taken. I can only think that you had somehow foreseen this, and yet I will no longer sit here and wait upon your words.

I think of your safety as I send my most trusted friend to find you and deliver this last original of the Precursors who worked bronze.

Your faithful son

[illegible]

Part Six Translation ("Tanai" of the Official Vanguard Forums): We who remained and those of our people who remain found our heroes Menjammel and Betkammiss, they who had defeated the skyfire and quieted the pit. They were weak in flesh having been cloven in many places by those who dwelt within the pit. In accordance with the words of the Wise, we who are the people made them our kings and set forth to the East to a homeland for ourselves. Let it be here remembered in this Chronicle of the Shield-bearer that our kings will make a new home for us and that those who heed these words will remember another ---- coming...

COMMANDER HARIC SLEED

I, Haric Sleed, Commander of Tursh Outpost, Officer of Gray Fox Brigade, Kingdom of Thestra, Humbly invite the Council of Thestra to visit the expanded Tursh Outpost.

In order to maintain an ever vigilant watch to the west in anticipation of hostile forces, I have outfitted and now command a disciplined and well trained garrison.

I have ordered the building of permanent structures for the families of the garrison stationed here, as well as the artisans and merchants needed to support such a community. This has increased our effectiveness in that leaves of absence have been drastically reduced. No longer do our soldiers have to take the long journey to New Targonor for the companionship and ministrations of their families. Morale has improved greatly.

I have also established a training ground for the youth here in order to ready an additional line of defense. It has been well received and we are ready to promote our first class of recruits. As more families come, the next class of recruits is filling up quickly.

Tursh, as an outpost, and especially as a community, cannot stand without the grace and strength of New Targonor. We remain a steadfast watch upon the western flank of the glorious city of His Majesty ever vigilant.

*Signed,
Haric Sleed
Commander, Tursh Outpost*

HANRICK, RENDIL AND THE SAGES ARCANE¹

All these accolades and attention for that paltry cantrip? If he hadn't read my treatise on the properties of musk weed, he would have never found this so-called 'breakthrough'. He has been here all of four years and he thinks that is enough time to be considered for admission to the Order. By all means, allow him membership. Then perhaps we will be rid of him finally as he begins his outside research.

*Overheard Comments From the Sages Arcane Conclave
From the Great Library of New Targonor*



You should see it as an honor that young Hanrick was chosen by them. I heard only a few handful of applicants are accepted each year. And to have them come seeking Hanrick, without him even applying, is almost unheard of. To have a member of the Sages Arcane in your family leads to many opportunities. Besides, it is one less mouth for you to feed while they train him.

-Unknown acquaintance of the Lantier family



1. The following collection of correspondence has been compiled as close to chronological order as possible. The title "Hanrick, Rendil, and the Sages Arcane" has been added for descriptive purposes. Refer to "Secrecy's Price" on page 202 for more information on Rendil.

We of Sages Arcane understand and acknowledge the hardship you are experiencing. However, quite simply, Hanrick's training is not complete. His time with us is not done nor will it be anytime in the near future. Therefore, your request to end his apprenticeship under my tutelage is denied.

I do understand that each month he has been sending you much of the coin earned from the small tasks he performs for my colleagues. That should go long ways to mending any grievance or slight you have incurred.

Dorrin Longreat



I do know that most former apprentices are assumed to give tacit approval to their former mentors in hopes of furthering their own influence and power within the order, however I cannot in good conscience support the nomination of Dorrin Longreat as Master. There are certain delicate matters which prevent me from advocating on his behalf. If the august members of the nomination committee wish to formally enquire further, I will reluctantly divulge these matters.

Hanrick Lantier



Unfortunately, I will not be returning to the enclave in the foreseeable future. My disagreement with the election of Master Longreat is well known within the Order and should be reason enough for my absence. In addition, I have served nobly and with distinction within the Sages Arcane for many years. During that time, I had put my own pursuits on hold for the betterment of the Order. It is beyond time that I begin to devote my energies to this project.

*Hanrick Lantier,
In a letter to Rendil Wainscot*



I am saddened by the choice of Dorrin Longreat as the new Master of the Sages Arcane. To say that my opposition to his appointment will make my time, as well as my contributions to this body, difficult is a severe understatement. Unfortunately, the members don't realize the loss we have incurred with the passing of Gelgar Lonstat. This is the last you will hear from me for awhile. I am heading to Left Nurae to research more into my "project". My days with the Sages Arcane are numbered.

*Hanrick Lantier
In a letter to Rendil Wainscot*

You are hereby ordered to journey to the village of Tursh and seek out those individuals with a natural adeptness for the arcane arts. Preferably, you should concentrate on those who have as yet not been pledged in apprenticeship. However, if you find an individual highly gifted who has already begun an apprenticeship, you are to submit their name immediately to your mentor. The negotiations to release an apprentice into our care are both time consuming and expensive and not part of your mandate.

Order Letter for Rendil Wainscott



I am very excited to be a part of this project, Father. Never before has the guild actively sought out those gifted with the arcane. With the menace which destroyed our Targonor still active, there is certainly a need for more adepts.

I also remember back to my childhood when I would spend hours following around several Sages in hopes of learning something, anything that would help me understand why I felt differently from those around me. I have to apologize to you for the frustration you must have felt in dealing with me as a child. I realize now how much of a burden I probably was. Thank you for supporting me.

I have no idea how long I will remain in Tursh or where I will venture next. My orders come from the guild and I move when they say. Give my love to Elvara.

*Letter to Milus
Rendil Wainscott*



I chose you for this special mission because of the need for discretion. He is not to return to New Targonor. Use whatever means you need to accomplish this. And leave no trace of our hand in this matter.

- D.L.



I have heard encouraging reports of your progress in finding a few new initiates. These have certainly been dour times in regards to finding suitable candidates. However, it appears that Tursh was an opportune first stop on your journey. Be mindful to evaluate the candidates in all aspects and not just their propensity for magic. A flawed personality will flaw the potential just as water will surely wear away at even the most solid rock.

*Hanrick Lantier
In a letter to Rendil Wainscott*



You are hereby ordered to rendezvous with Member Rendil Wainscott north and west of Tursh. From there, you are to assist him in testing for new initiates. You should concentrate on the areas west of Tursh, bypassing Rindol Field, and culminating in the hills of the Widow's Veil peaks. There should be no human settlements past the most immediate foothills. Don't be alarmed if you see Dwarven patrols. Bordinar's Cleft lies to the South and the dwarves are known to zealously patrol that region.

Order Letter for Corrine Felspar



Have you given any further thought to joining me in Leth Nurae? I can certainly use your assistance trying to decipher through these seemingly endless notes. I have also found something rather intriguing pertaining to your current study. I am hesitant to say anything further of fear of this note falling into the wrong hands. I think we both know to whom I am referring. Beware, for your own status within the Order is not completely secure.

*Hanrick Lantier
In a letter to Rendil Wainscott*



Your time within Tursh has come to an end. You are to proceed west from Tursh and visit any small settlements you find in hopes of finding others who are gifted. Avoid Rindol Field as we have yet to find many Halflings capable of even the simplest of cantrips. Going there would be a waste of valuable time.

As for Tursh, we are sending another recent Member to continue in your stead. We do expect full reports from you while you are in the field and those should arrive in a timely matter.

Order Letter for Rendil Wainscott



After such success in Tursh, I have no idea why I have been ordered away. Why am I being pushed further west from my family, my colleagues, and everything I know? My desire was to continue building the foundation for a strong Sages Arcane presence within Tursh. Perhaps my association to you has become a point of contention, especially in light of your own departure from New Targonor. My hope is there is more practical reason for my sudden change in orders than this apparent political reason.

*Rendil Wainscott,
In a letter to Hanrick Lantier*



I hope this letter finds you well. I know it has been a while since you have heard from me but I have been sent away from Tursh on further business for the Sages Arcane and it is difficult finding a reliable means of sending letters home where I am at. I find travelers heading towards New Targonor who are willing to deliver these messages usually but the area northwest of Tursh is sparsely populated and lightly traveled. Life is lonely this far from you and the rest of the family. However, the last orders I received say that another member of the Order will be joining me soon for a trek further to the west. I don't think we are heading as far as Targonor but certainly we will be going into the Widow's Veil Peaks.

*Letter to Milus,
Rendil Wainscott*



Since my departure from Tursh, I have spent time at several small farms located due northwest of Tursh. I have found only one promising candidate at this time, the daughter of a dairy farmer. She has a natural propensity for performing the simple cantrips. I am negotiating with her parents to allow me to test her further and to extend an offer of apprenticeship. If her potential is what I think it is, she will be a welcome addition to our Order.

Report from Rendil Wainscott



This letter serves as entry for the bearer, Maltide Grimor, into New Targonor for the purpose of apprenticeship to the Sages Arcane. Accord her all rights and passage due to an initiate. This letter also serves as notice of receipt of the new orders. Corrine Felspar has located this agent and we are proceeding into the hills to the south and west.

Rendil Wainscott on the authority of the Sages Arcane



I have dealt with the matter. There should be no evidence of any of our hands in the situation. The only worry I have is I was unable to find his body to conclusively put this to rest. As of what became of it, I can only surmise those undead dragged him away for some nefarious purpose.

- C.F.



It is with great sadness that I write to inform you of the death of Rendil.² I had been traveling with him throughout the lands around and beyond Tursh. About a week ago, we were set upon by a band of horrific beings while exploring the northern fringes of the Widow's Veil Peaks. Rendil valiantly tried to fend them off to allow me time to escape. I, in turn, attempted to draw their attention to give him his escape. Unfortunately, he fell before I could assist him and I retreated.

I know it would make your loss easier to have his body to bury, however, when I returned to the site of the attack, he was no where to be found. I fear his body was taken by these beasts. Again, I cannot express my sorrow for your loss. I have also written the Sages Arcane apprising them of the situation. You should expect to hear from them as well.

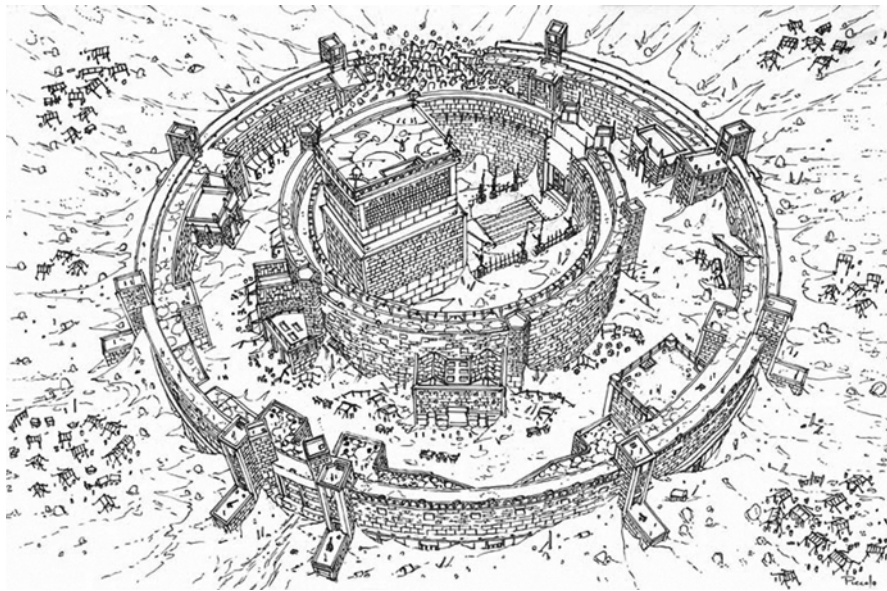
*With deep sadness,
Corrine Felspar*



2. See also "Page 117" from the "Journal of Elvara Tuhr" on page 359

I wish to express our deepest gratitude for the service of your son³, Rendil Wainscott, to our endeavors. His contributions to furthering our interests were exemplary. We of the Sages Arcane are greatly saddened by his death. We know there are no words we can use to express the despair you and your family feel at this news. His service to not only our order but to the entire Kingdom of Thestra will always live on.

*In deepest sincerity,
Dorrin Longreat*

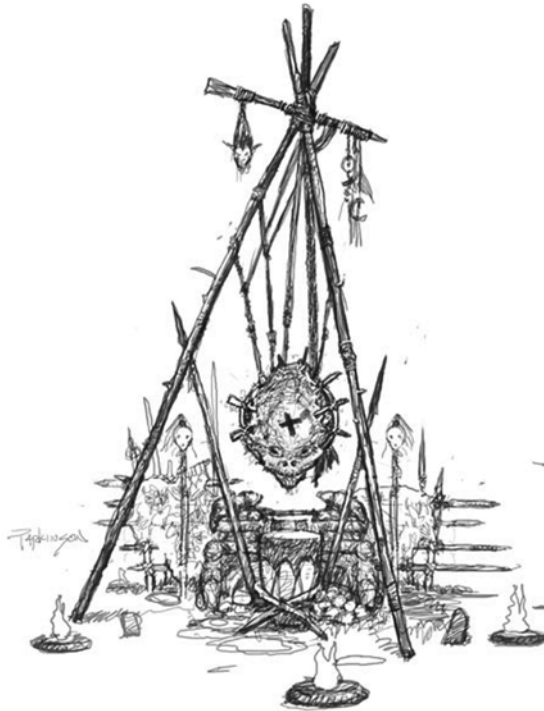


3. See also "Page 120" from the "Journal of Elvara Tuhr" on page 360.

LETTERS OF THELUS DURON

“NEXT, I PLAN TO VENTURE INTO THE WILD...”

Next, I plan to venture into the wild northeastern plains. I have heard much of a settlement, on the fringes of the elven woods, created by the elusive Vulmani. As you know, this will be my first encounter with this society. Hopefully, my guide, appointed to me by His Majesty, will be able to negotiate entry into their encampment. He assures me that he is known and accepted by this tribe.



UNKNOWN AUTHORS

DISPATCHES TO NEW TARGONOR

The vulmane appeared to have settled into their new village. The elves are tolerant of their presence, but only through necessity. The wolf men, for the most part, have kept to themselves entirely and do not venture far from their homes. They have been beaten and demoralized, but still retain their pride.⁴



The vulmane are trying... and while the elves are not openly hostile, they do not work towards peace. the wolf men seem to be at a loss for what to do next. Perhaps it is best to just let the elves be for now. With time, they will grow more tolerant of the vulmani presence in their forest.



A fray was narrowly avoided when a small group of Vulmani entered elven territory three days ago. They claimed to merely be traveling through, but would not reveal their destination. Their stubbornness goaded the Elves into hostility, which in turn angered the wolf men. Sometimes I think there will never be peace between these two peoples.

⁴. *This text was not attributed to "Dispatches to Targonor," yet it does have an identical voice and topic matter, thus archived here.*

RECRUIT ALDRIC MASON

ARRIVAL

Dear Family,

I apologize for not writing sooner, I know I promised I would - but the world moves so much faster in the city, you lose track of time. I arrived safely in New Targonor late last week to begin my formal training before I'm officially admitted into the great army. The summers spent playing around the barracks back home have served me well, as I'm already accustomed to the somewhat unique code of military behavior some of the others seem to be having trouble adjusting to.

I've made a few friends, but have kept to myself for the most part - just taking everything in. The people here seem to always be in a hurry, but they are polite and helpful none the less. A local merchant went out of his way to help guide me to the officer's dormitory to report in, but then hurried off before I had the chance to properly thank him. When I can afford the time, I intend to find the man's shop and buy him a drink.

I get ahead of myself though, I'm fairly certain I know what you really want to hear now that you know I'm alive and well. And the answer is yes, the city really is as big as they say. Bigger even. The very keep which guards our village could grow legs and walk right through New Targonor's gates. Never in my life could I have imagined such a place to exist. Even during the most exhaustive drills, the site of the great walls serves as an inspiration to us all. They are massive and may outlast everything but the gods themselves.

The captain is calling for us, I will write more as soon as I can. Send my wishes to the others, and please make sure uncle Zeke doesn't cook my pig.

Recruit Aldric Mason

NEW TARGONOR

Dear Family,

My apologies for stopping so short in my last letter - the roof over our supply building partially collapsed and we had to repair it quickly or the weather may have damaged our equipment. I'm sure you're eager though to hear more about the city.

Before I was allowed to enter New Targonor, I was questioned thoroughly by one of the many guards stationed at the gate. I was not offended though, in fact it is pleasing to see such care being taken to safeguard the city. And as a young man carrying nothing but a knapsack on his back and a cudgel on his shoulder I can understand the need to know my reason for being there. After I explained my business within the walls the guard brightened considerably. He told me that the training could be grueling, and that I would be pushed to my limits but to stay strong and finish because the end result is very rewarding. He seemed to be a good man, perhaps I will serve alongside him someday.

I know no words to accurately describe what happened next as I passed through the main gates. The transformation was startling, in but a few mere steps I left the open countryside and entered a teeming city positively overflowing with activity. Even the largest festivals back home cannot compare to the average day in New Targonor. Merchants peddle their wares at every corner; workers hang from the sides of buildings building them forever higher and armored guards patrol the streets, doing their best to remain in the background until they are needed.

One morning as the patrol of new recruits I am in was marching through part of the city; a merchant's cart full of apples broke an axle and tipped over, spilling its contents into the street. Two guards helped him clean up the mess and watched the cart while the merchant went to find a replacement. I think I shall enjoy serving very much.

I have heard that next week all the new recruits will be invited to dine within the keep itself one evening. I very much hope that this rumor turns out to be true. For every bit massive that the city's walls are the keep is that much greater. I have seen mountains peak closer to the ground than the keep. I do not expect us to be able to ascend to the top, as I'm told that is a restricted area reserved for royalty and only the most important of diplomats. But from even halfway up, I wonder how far I would be able to see. It's exciting to think about -- still, I shouldn't get my hopes up as the captain hasn't spoken a word of it yet. But until he does, I shall wait eagerly.

Recruit Aldric Mason

DINNER

Dear Family,

As I write this my heart is still pounding. I have just returned from a banquet held in our honor at the keep this evening. It was truly a marvelous experience and most certainly a highlight of my life.

The captain waited to tell us anything until just this morning when we awoke for the day at dawn. As we began to prepare ourselves for the day's drills and training exercises, the captain walked into the barracks and acted as if he were extremely displeased with us. I thought one of the recruits must have gotten into trouble in the city and been arrested from the way he was storming about. After a few moments though he cracked a smile, something he rarely does, and informed us to go bathe and put on our best clothes.

I had a thousand things flying through my head as we rushed off to do as the captain ordered. I wasn't the only one who'd heard the rumor that we may be invited to the keep - many of the others speculated excitedly that maybe tonight was to be the night. I very much wished that indeed it was, but I didn't want to get my hopes up in case that wasn't what all the ruckus was about.

After we'd all bathed, which I must say was very much needed, we assembled back in our barracks as we were instructed. The captain was waiting for us and it was then that he informed us we'd be eating our supper inside the walls of the great keep.

I returned not more than an hour ago and I don't even remember what we had to eat. Who would have thought I'd share a meal with important diplomats and even royalty? I'm rambling though, I know. It's late, I'll write more soon, I promise.

Recruit Aldric Mason

THE DOCKS

Dear Family,

As you know, I've never been overly fond of being in the water - especially when I can't see the bottom. This week that changed completely. We began our naval training several days ago and while the work is hard and physically exhausting I must say that I am enjoying it thoroughly.

The docks are far beneath the city in a large natural cavern that leads out to the open sea. Just getting there is an adventure in itself. Due to the time it takes to reach them, we've moved our barracks to a building just off the piers for the duration of our naval exercises. It's taken some time for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit caverns, as I'm not accustomed to having no sky above my head. While I know the city is above us I feel somewhat removed from it all. I do like it down here though, but it is always nice to see the sun again.

We've been training mostly on the fleet's smaller vessels, which are still many times larger than any boat I'd ever been on before. At first the constant rocking made me nervous and made it difficult to maneuver through the rigging, but the more I'm on the water, the more I like it. It has a calming effect that I've felt nowhere else. I also can't help but take a moment to sit back and stare every time we leave the docks and venture out to sea. The sight of the city standing proudly on top of the rocky cliffs is something I doubt I'll ever tire of.

More Soon,

Recruit Aldric Mason

LIBRARY

Dear Family,

The city has been under constant siege by violent rainstorms all week. For the first couple of days, the captain took us out for training in spite of the weather, but the fields have since become far too muddy for our marches. Only the crown's elite forces work through conditions like these and strangely, they actually appear to enjoy it.

Yesterday, after three days of grueling indoor exercise and repetitious drills, we were finally granted a day to use however we saw fit. Most of the recruits stayed cloistered in the barracks, and at first, I remained inside as well, deter-

mined to catch up on much needed rest. That plan dissolved quickly when it became clear that I wouldn't be able to sleep with the thunder echoing through our chambers.

Instead, I took the opportunity to visit New Targonor's great library. Never in my life have I seen so many books gathered in one place. I tried to convince some of the other recruits to come with me, but to no avail. It is startling to me how few of them are able to read and write. I now realize that all of the long winters you made me sit with the scribes was time not wasted.

So I sat in the library for the entire afternoon, browsing through its tomes. Textbooks, epic adventures and histories filled the bulk of the shelves and as I pored over the pages the hours seemed to pass like minutes. It would take me years to absorb all that the library has to offer. I greatly look forward to the day I have time to come back and pay the texts the attention they deserve.

Recruit Aldric Mason

TEMPLE

Dear Family,

I must have walked past the entrance to New Targonor's temple over a hundred times, but until today I had never been inside. As you know, I am not a very religious man, but after seeing the temple's interior it almost makes me wish that I were. Many of the recruits are quite devoted to their faiths and are allowed a significant amount of time for worship. I am beginning to envy them.

The temple itself has been built directly into the side of the earth, giving it a very unique look. The entrance is grand indeed, and though the rooms themselves are not gigantic, there are many of them. I hadn't the time to explore much, but from the look of the hallways I think there is quite a bit left for me to see. Perhaps, on another visit, I shall call on one of the priests to guide me through the premises, if they can spare the time.

Recruit Aldric Mason

GRADUATION

Dear Family,

My formal training is, as of yesterday, over. After the induction ceremony to be held later this week I will officially be a soldier in the great army of New Targonor. Words cannot accurately describe how excited I am by this. The training has been hard, impossible it seemed at times, but very rewarding.

The captain has asked us to submit requests of which specific area in the army we would like to serve but I am having difficulty making up my mind. While working on the sea vessels was an amazing experience, I would also very much like to see more of Thestra, so perhaps I will request a tower guard assignment. I have until tomorrow night to submit my request, so I will continue to weigh my options. The captain made no promises that our requests would be granted either, so the point may very well be moot.

In other news, now that our training is over we've been rewarded with a small bit of leisure time. I am proud to say, that after much work, I was able to track down the kindly merchant who first helped me when I arrived in New Targonor all those weeks ago. I didn't know any good taverns in the city, but he suggested a place called "The Baron's Tooth". It was loud and rowdy, but fun and I was finally able to buy him that drink.

I hope all of you are doing well and I will write again as soon as I find out where I'm to be assigned.

Recruit Aldric Mason

WILLEM'S STAND

PART ONE

General Tiburon,

Enclosed is the final report concerning one Captain Rastus Willem and his actions leading to and during the fall of Targonor. Willem was widely known as a brute of a man, but a fierce warrior and a good soldier. He had been linked to a number of incidents that seem to have been swept under the rug, but never brought much attention to himself until he was implicated in the slaying of a ranking official in the court after a royal function.

There was no condemning evidence against him, however. Willem was transferred to a new, lower command and the entire situation was soon forgotten. The captain was no simpleton but his power was limited and he alone could not have manufactured the cover up or the transfer. We believe now, that he was involved in a larger, more organized group. This has all the tells of the Crimson Ring, but of course, we have no substantial evidence.

During the salvaging of Targonor we were able to unearth many documents we may have normally never been privy to. Acquiring these documents has not been easy, but with small enough groups moving quickly we are able to get into and out of the city without being detected... most of the time. What follows is what we have been able to piece together, as close to chronologically as we are able to estimate.



Liege,

I was assigned my new command position today. The move could not have come at a better time, I suppose I have you to thank for that. I am now responsible for a unit of infantry footmen. I was introduced to them by Commander Askalon earlier today, and while their numbers are not overly great I was impressed with their skill and prowess. These are not eager young boys desperate to prove themselves in battle. They are trained, hardened soldiers who obey orders and will be no chore to command.

Their former captain, a man by the name of Algan whom I knew only by reputation was severely injured during an accident just outside the city walls

a few weeks ago. He had stopped to aid a merchant whose overloaded wagon had become entrenched in a muddy rut along the side of the road. He and a few of his men had taken a position at the rear of the wagon and pushed, while the merchant guided the steer pulling from the front. The tension on the wagon's wooden frame became too much though, and the rear axle cracked and shattered. Algan's soldiers were able to jump out of the way as the wagon came crashing down, but the captain was caught in the face by a flying splinter and was unable to leap to safety.

It did not take long for his men to free the captain from underneath the wagon but the damage had been done. I am told the finest physicians in Targonor are tending to him, but Algan has yet to regain consciousness and even if he does his military days will be over.

The men seemed quite fond of their captain, and morale is currently low. I plan to commence training exercises as soon as I am able, both to put something else on their minds as well as to get them used to the sound of my voice giving orders. Were the men not so well trained I would be more concerned, but they are soldiers and they can handle loss. I am confident within a few weeks time it will cease to be an issue.

I was also shown to my new quarters in the officer's district, they are smaller than I am accustomed to but they are adequate and will serve their purpose just fine. I have a study and a small garden in the back. It has not been tended to in some time, but I should be able to make something of it.

Upon first impressions, the new post looks very promising. I thank you for the expediency and discreteness in which this situation was handled and will keep you updated.

CRW

PART TWO

The unit was assigned a new captain today, a man by the name of Rastus Willem. I've heard the name, but before today had never met him. He's a large, sturdy man, barrel chested and thick limbed. He appears to be approaching middle age and he's got medium length dark, knotted hair. It looks as if it's been a while since he's had a good shave.

He didn't talk with us much today. It was more of a formal introduction and he was whisked away by Commander Askalon before many of us had the chance to speak with him. I expect he'll be back sometime tomorrow to talk

with us in more depth. Either way is fine with me, he didn't appear to be much of a conversationalist. Then again, neither was Captain Algan.

I miss our former captain. Word has it that he's still in a slumber and has shown no signs of life since the accident. His wife and two daughters remain constantly by his side, praying for his recovery. I know that even should he awake tomorrow his crippled form will keep him from ever commanding us again. This saddens me greatly as it was he who molded the Red Blades into what we are today. Both Askalon and his superiors have expressed their sympathy, but it has done little to lessen the loss.

Captain Willem follows in the wake of one of the best men I have ever known. He has a very large void to fill and the other men, as well as myself, certainly have our doubts.

I know little of Willem other than what was told to us this afternoon. I have heard rumors that he'd been ranked much higher, and had served a position in the royal court guard. Such rumors weigh as heavily upon me as the wind which carries them but if they are indeed true it would be a worrisome affair.

Why would he be placed in a lesser command? The Red Blades have a reputation, a well-earned reputation, but as an officer in the court guard he would have outranked even Algan. I could be so bold as to say he was demoted, but it is just as possible that he requested the position. For what reasons though, remains a mystery to me.

To judge him this early on would be unfair. I am hopeful but remain skeptical, Willem has a long way to go to prove himself.

*Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit*

PART THREE

Liege,

As I predicted, the training exercises helped to ease the situation considerably. The soldiers proved to be a resilient bunch and bounced back quickly. Unfortunately, late last week we received word that Captain Algan had died, still deep in his slumber. Morale once again dropped as the men began to mourn.

Algan's funeral was held the day before last and I felt obligated to attend. It was an awkward affair and I felt a bit out of place surrounded by the loved ones of a man I'd just replaced. None of the men will say it, but I sense that

some of them resent my presence and my attendance of the funeral only intensified those feelings. Algan's widow did seek me out to give me her blessings. I appreciated the gesture, but I overheard her two daughters speaking of me to a group of boys later. Needless to say, I do not have their blessings. I was startled by what exactly they had to say though, not the names and curses they were surprisingly fluent with for girls of their age, but by some of the accusations they were making against me.

They seemed to know that I served previously in the royal guard and implied that I was somehow involved in the murder of Chancellor Kerrick. You said you would keep this transition quiet. I can't very well do my job if there are whispers of 'murderer' circling me wherever I go. This must be taken care of immediately. Do not make me regret my decision.

CRW

PART FOUR

Commander Askalon,

I apologize sincerely for interrupting your hunting trip, and I hope that it has been an enjoyable one thus far, but matters requiring your attention have arisen. As you know, I have been training the Red Blades harder than usual as of late, to remove their minds from the untimely death of Captain Algan. We have been venturing progressively farther south on small expeditions, nothing overly large but they keep us from Targonor for several days at a time.

During our latest such expedition we marched nearly to the wolf-men's territory. We began to encounter vulmane during our drills, a few at first, but then in greater numbers. Tension was high at first, I explained we were only there for training purposes and invited a number of them to join us for a meal as a gesture of good will, though they declined. Something has them bothered, and they refused to allow us to march any further south.

One of the more forthcoming among them claimed that the vulmane are at war. I saw no evidence to reflect this but the very air surrounding them crackled with apprehension. Be it a war or not, there is trouble amongst the vulmane. For the time being I am keeping all of my men in Targonor, we will train from here. I strongly recommend that you issue the command to keep the rest of our forces near as well until we are able to further identify what is going on.

Captain Rastus Willem

PART FIVE

The captain's decision to leap back into training so quickly and so aggressively perhaps was not the wisest course of action. He should have given the men time to grieve. He had no sooner heard the news of Algan's death than he had us marching south for some pointless training exercise. The captain treats us as recruits, thinking that pushing us hard will somehow make us forget everything else. He does not know the Red Blades nearly as well as he thinks. We are deeply saddened by Algan's death but we are still able to cope and to function normally, we are not children. Willem has been acting odd lately, as if he has something else on his mind. More than once, I have smelt what I believe to be spirits on his breath. He often seems distracted and out of sorts. I hope he realizes he is becoming a problem and remedies whatever is bothering him soon. Many of the others are not as forgiving as I.

Fortunately, for the time being we appear to be rooted in Targonor. Captain Willem made the decision to keep us here based off his interaction with the vulmane during our last little camping trip. There is no doubt something had the wolf men bothered but I did not think nearly as much of it as the captain did, that is until today.

An exhausted vulmane was spotted by a tower guard approaching the city in the early hours of the morning. I have never seen one of the wolf men this far north. He was tired and haggard looking, even for a vulmane. I was not on patrol at the time so I did not have the chance to get very close to it, but from what the other soldiers tell me it was rambling something about enraged spirits and retribution.

I do not know the intent of the vulmane's trek to Targonor. There are rumors aplenty of course, some say it came to request military aid, something no vulmane has ever done before. Others say it merely brought warning of coming danger, also something no vulmane has ever done before. I do not know much of the wolf men but I do know that the vulmane are a people governed by custom and change is not something they welcome with open arms. For the decision to be made to send an emissary, they must truly believe something extraordinary is happening, this fact alone worries me more than anything

*Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit*

PART SIX

Liege,

Commander Askalon returned early from his hunting trip upon receiving my letter urging him to pull all our army inside the walls of Targonor. The commander agreed with my reasoning and save for a few smaller forces that have been sent south to investigate, our army is all back in the city.

The small expeditionary forces departed yesterday morning. Their numbers are quite modest and they are being sent for intelligence gathering purposes only. Riders will maintain a constant contact between them and Targonor. I expect that we will receive first word from them the day after next.

As I am sure you have heard, last week a vulmane was spotted out the southern gates of the city. We brought the creature in for questioning, it was exhausted and in poor shape. However, after a good meal it looked considerably better, the wolf men are a sturdy race. It spoke of angered spirits rising from the seas to eliminate the peoples of Thestra.

The stories it told sounded as if they had been taken straight from a children's tale and normally I would not give them much credence. However, the vulmane surprised me with its intelligence. He was certainly no dumb beast. I honestly do not know what to make of his claims though. He truly believed what he was saying, there is not a doubt in my mind about that... but angry spirits from the sea? It seems awful far-fetched. Whatever it is though, it has the vulmane scared.

CRW

PART SEVEN

Rastus is a drunk. I was right when I thought I smelled liquor on his breath, but I had no idea as to the extent. He shows up every morning to "lead" us, or so he says, obviously inebriated. He's still able to function but his actions are less steady and his speech slurred. I should have known. His behavior is unprofessional and completely unacceptable even for the lowest recruit, let alone an officer in his position. I am unsure how to approach this problem though, confronting Rastus himself would most likely not bring about the desired results but the only other option would be to go over his head and an action such as that is not overly conducive to a bright career in the military for me.

That is not the only of our troubles right now either. The scouting unit that was sent south to investigate the vulmane's claims were supposed to send riders back with continual reports of their findings, even if only to report that there were no findings. It has been two weeks now and we have not heard a word.

I honestly do not think very many people expected the scouts to find anything in the south and while any theory as to their whereabouts right now is pure speculation, the fact that we haven't heard from them is just... unsettling. I do not know if Commander Askalon plans to send another unit or wait a while longer to see what happens. Were I in charge I am not sure what I would do. If something happened to those men, sending another group only to have the same thing come upon them does not seem very smart, but on the other hand, if something did happen to them it serves only as further reason why we must know what is going on down there. There are many worrisome events unfolding around me, I will not sleep well tonight.

*Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit*

PART EIGHT

Commander Askalon,

Two of our men from the scouting party were picked up a distance outside the city walls this morning. It has been weeks since we last heard from any of the force. One of them was critically wounded and unfortunately died shortly after his arrival. The other has serious injuries and may not live through the night. He is incoherent, feverish and rambling – we have not been able to gain any insight as to the current situation from him.

They arrived on foot just before dawn. While seemingly insignificant, this fact tells us that something had happened to their horses. Whether that is relevant information we have yet to determine, but we must work with what is available to us.

Both men were heavily wounded. The deceased soldier clearly bled to death. He had massive slashing wounds across his torso and abdomen. Other than it was from a blade, I could not venture to guess what sort of sword caused the wound.

The second soldier has a few cuts but his wounds are largely internal. He is bruised deeply all over and looks to have been bludgeoned very forcefully by something. He is alive, but his condition is rapidly deteriorating.

He did have one item that may be of note though. In his belt pouch, we found a rolled up scroll with a rough sketch drawn onto it. When shown the picture on the scroll, the soldier reacts violently.



I took the liberty of having a scribe make several duplicates of the sketch, however, enclosed in this envelope is the original. It may very well be our only clue as to the fate of the rest of our men.

Captain Rastus Willem

PART NINE

Commander Askalon,

Less than half of the scouts we dispatched early last week have returned, but those who have brought with them valuable information.

The Vulmane are at war and they are losing, badly. They have suffered horrendous losses and most of their fiercest warriors have long since fallen.

The force who opposes them has finally been identified, and it would seem that our worst fears have been confirmed. The sketch the soldier who died shortly after returning to us had with him does indeed depict one of the invaders.

Through what means or for what purpose I can only imagine, the dead are laying siege to Thestra.

The surviving Vulmane have begun to flee their homeland, they still take heavy losses daily and are moving en mass to the forests east of Leth Nurae. I am curious to see what the Elves' response will be. If they were going to mount a campaign to rid Thestra of the Vulmane now would be the time to strike.

Perhaps the greater wisdom though would be to wait. The dead were hardly affected by the Vulmani resistance and they slowly make their way north. War makes for unlikely allies and right now the Vulmane are the only ones who really know what we are up against.

Captain Rastus Willem

PART TEN

I am furious...I cannot believe the nerve of that man. He is not only a disgrace to the unit but to the city as a whole.

I saw Rastus accept a bribe today. Right out in plain sight! The unit was on our guard rotation and he let a wagon into the city without even inspecting it. The driver gave him a pouch, full of coin I am sure, and Rastus just let him through.

The man is a fool, with everything going on... how can he risk letting the gods know what into the city? The Vulmane have been obliterated, the few survivors taking refuge in the forest of the elves. The Halflings are beginning to abandon their beloved Willowroot, fleeing to the fields northeast of Bordinar's Cleft. The dead are coming, everyone knows. The entire city is thick with tension and bordering on open panic.

The only thing keeping the order is us and now Rastus is taking bribes. It was not enough being a drunken fool, now he is a crooked drunken fool.

I doubt he could even use that big sword he is so fond of parading around with. He looks worse than a sick dog and does not smell much better. Maybe

we will get lucky and the cretin will drink himself to death before we need a real leader.

*Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit*

PART ELEVEN

Liege,

I was told there would be no more shipments, yet within the last week, four have arrived. I said no more and I meant it. I am beginning to lose patience. Now is not the time. Any further shipments will not be permitted entrance into the city.

The dead continue their march north. Their death... is a disease. The animals, the trees and the land itself have become tainted. Their goals still remain a mystery to us, they make no attempts to communicate. The Vulmane have come to some sort of agreement with the elves of Leth Nurae and will be permitted to take refuge in the outskirts of their forest... at what I cost though, I wonder.

The Halflings have nearly abandoned Willowroot, only a few of the more stubborn residents remain.

Targonor is a proud city. We will not flee. Even now, our armies are being assembled and mobilized. We will overwhelm the dead and with the full might of Targonor, rip them from the surface of Thestra.

The Gold Eagle Brigade will be at the vanguard. Their cavalry riders are unrivaled. In two weeks time the armies of Targonor march south to meet and destroy the invaders.

CRW



I have just turned a shipment away from the gates. Next time I will confiscate the goods and put the drivers in prison. Consider our relationship terminated.

CRW

PART TWELVE

We march the day after next. I am nervous, but anxious to rid ourselves of the plague that has claimed nearly half of Thestra.

Willem is barely able to stand himself up. I do not know how he plans to lead the unit into battle. His condition has taken a noticeable turn for the worse in the last week. He does not appear to be sleeping and continues to drown whatever his problems are with a flask.

Now though, he seems almost... worried, scared even. The entire unit is nervous but this is no different than any battle.

We apprehended a handful of smugglers several days ago at the gates. Rastus ordered them imprisoned. That is when it started, the color left his face and he broke a sweat after issuing the command. I know that look, I've seen it before. It is the look of a man who knows he is going to die.

Maybe he got in to something too deep? I do not know but whatever he gets, he deserves. He had better sober himself up before the Red Blades march.

*Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit*

PART THIRTEEN

Commander Askalon,

The Red Blades have made it back to Targonor. We sustained heavy losses but are better off than most. The Golden Eagle Brigade, within a matter of minutes, was slain to the man... and then rose to fight against us.

No matter how many times we struck them down, they kept rising to fight again, never once so much as making a sound. Our forces were decimated. We will be lucky if half of the men make it back to Targonor.

I have never been so thoroughly beaten, and for all the damage inflicted the dead do not even appear to have been weakened.

There is no time to rest. We must act quickly. They will come for Targonor next.

Captain Rastus Willem

PART FOURTEEN

Dreyan, my boyhood friend and fellow Red Blade, was slain in front of me by the dead. He fell for a moment, then stood back up and attacked me. I did not know what to do. I tried to reason with him, but could not ward off his blows and continue fighting. I swung my sword at him and he collapsed.

I do not know how long he stayed down, because retreat was called, but I don't imagine it was long. To think of good Dreyan as being one of them... it is sickening. Some great evil has invaded Thestra, I pray we find a way to stop it.

The King has ordered Targonor evacuated. An outpost along the northern coast of Thestra has been chosen as the site to regroup. Groups of civilians with small armored escorts have already begun to leave. It is a long journey and upon the first group's arrival fortifications will begin construction.

I only hope there is enough time before the dead reach us. Their numbers grow and every day they are spotted farther north. It will not be long before they reach Targonor.

Edonus Taggart
Red Blade Unit

PART FIFTEEN

General Tiburon,

That is all the written evidence we were able to recover. There undoubtedly was more, but it has been forever lost in the ruins of old Targonor. We were, however, able to secure testimony from the last known person to have left Targonor and lived, a royal scribe by the name of Pepran Baldarus. His account, as authored by him, is as follows...



"The dead are within three day's march of the city," Commander Askalon said grimly, as I recall.

Commander Winston Askalon marched down the length of the dim chamber, his military boots falling heavily on the stone floor. Torchlight flickered off the walls unevenly, dancing through the commander's shadow. Askalon was in late middle age, he was a proud man who had served Targonor for his

entire adult life. His short, silvery hair was thinning now though. While there was still a youthful twinkle in his brown eyes, he was no longer the feared warrior from years past. Age had softened Askalon.

His sword still hung boldly from his side, its blade as sharp as it had been twenty years ago. He drew it much less now, instead preferring diplomacy to resolve conflict. Soon though, he would unsheathe his sword again. The dead had driven the Vulmane from their lands and exacted a catastrophic defeat onto the human's assault. Now they came for Targonor.

"We need more time," the commander said. There was a profound worry in his voice, one that had never been there before. "We'll never finish getting everyone out before they reach us."

There were three others including myself in the council chamber. Askalon turned towards us, a grave look on his face.

"We need to slow the dead down," he said.

"What are you suggesting?" asked a deep voice. It was King Horus Targonor-Furth. He had been sitting in quiet contemplation for several minutes. The king wore simple clothing, having long since abandoned the more formal royal attire. His crown rested on the table before him, next to it lay his sword.

The king and the commander had been boyhood playmates. Askalon was now King Targonor's closest friend and most trusted advisor. The two men had been through much together. They were both big, sturdy, family men and respected leaders. Time had been equally hard on the king.

The first time I saw him, many years ago when I was still in my youth he had a full head of dark blond hair and a short, thick beard. Much like Askalon though, it was now mostly gray and deep wrinkles lined his kind eyes. Every new grey hair or wrinkle brought with it more wisdom, the king was fond of joking.

"What I am suggesting is..." Askalon struggled to find the words, "...My lord I request permission to stay behind with a few units of men and try to slow the undead advance."

The king rolled his eyes. "Winston, if you call me 'my lord' one more time I am going to talk to Marla and make sure you get nothing but raw beets to eat for a month. So stop it," he said with a grin.

I knew the grin to be a mask though. Askalon always became much more formal when times were serious but he also had meant every word he said. The king knew it too.

"Horus..." Askalon said, "A full third of the city has yet to evacuate and the dead will be here in a matter of days. Even if we were able to get everyone out in that time, they would be right behind us. Three more days, we need three more days. We can close the southern half of the city and my men and I can hold them off. That will be all the time we need to get you and the rest of the citizens out."

The king gave his friend a serious look. "A noble gesture, my friend," he said gently, "But most of the army has already gone. Besides, staying behind is certain death - you know that. I will not willingly order any more to their grave, enough have died already."

The commander returned his solemn look. "Even if it means saving thousands of others?"

A dreadful silence hung in the room for several seconds, finally another voice spoke up.

"He's right father." It was Horus' eldest son, Garus. He was a mirror image of the king -- powerfully built, broad shoulders and that thick blond head of hair, though he lacked his father's beard. I was privileged to have been his personal tutor for a number of years while he was a boy and was very proud at the young man Garus had grown to be.

Horus looked to his son, who sat next to him.

"If we don't, we risk losing everyone. The dead would simply just follow us north. They march day and night, it would not be long until they overtook us," the prince continued, "I can see no other way."

The king closed his eyes and sighed, bracing his forehead with both hands. He sat quietly for a moment, and then looked up. "What of you, Captain Willem?" he asked pointedly, "You've more experience against them than any of us, can they be held for three days?"

Captain Rastus Willem of the Red Blade Unit sat at the end of the table, his chair was turned around and he leaned heavily against the front of it. The Captain looked to be half-dead himself. He was unshaven and dark circles sagged under his deeply bloodshot eyes. Willem had a stocky, strong build

and his dark hair was knotted and dirty and fell into his eyes. He looked pale. His skin had a sickly, almost yellow tinge to it. He lifted his head slowly and looked down the table at the other men.

"Probably not," he said, his voice was rough and dry, "but it's the only shot we've got."

The king nodded slowly and thought quietly for a moment more.

"Very well then," he said. "Thank you all for your input, as always. Winston, Garus, please call an assembly of all those who are left. I wish to address them before nightfall."

Garus nodded.

"Of course," Commander Askalon said as he and the Prince hurried out of the chamber.

The king then turned to Rastus. "Captain Willem, the Red Blades are the best we have left..." he began to trail off.

"We'll stay until the end, if need be." Rastus responded.

Horus nodded. "Thank you," he said simply.

The meeting had taken place during the early afternoon. Prince Garus and Commander Askalon spent the next few hours hurriedly assembling what remained of the city's population. Captain Willem had left to, I can only assume, go talk to his troops. I stayed in the council chamber and continued to write. It was my job to document the evacuation and there was still much work to be done if there was to be any order at all once we arrived at the rebuilding site along the northern coast.

The king stayed in the chamber with me for a time, he sat quietly in deep contemplation. I know he was wrestling with the decision whether or not to leave a deployment of soldiers behind. I'm sure the thought that when he left for the new site that he'd be leaving behind men to die weighed more heavily on him than I can possibly imagine. Horus had been wracked with guilt upon the army's initial defeat at the hands of the dead, even though to a man, each of his advisors - Commander Askalon included - had agreed the best solution to the threat would be to eliminate it before they got to Targonor.

They had failed to do that, and Horus had made the hard decision to abandon the city and rebuild in the north. He had pledged that he would not leave until everyone had safely fled the city, that no man would be left behind. Now, it seemed as though he would have to go back on his word and I know that it was not sitting well with him.

I continued to work quietly, not wanted to disturb his thoughts, until there was a polite knock from the other side of the chamber's large doors.

"Enter, please." the king called out, as he was drawn from his thoughts.

The chamber's wooden door opened a bit and Garus peeked in. "The crowd has been assembled, father. It will be dark soon."

"Thank you," Horus replied, "I will be out in a moment."

Garus nodded and backed out of the room, closing the door softly. The king sighed and shot me a tired glance.

"I'm not really looking forward to this," he said.

I forced a smile. "Don't worry, you'll do fine. You always do."

In truth, I had absolutely no idea how he would do, or what he was even going to say. I was more than a little curious to hear it, myself and suddenly wished that I were not stuck in that room still working. Horus Targonor was a wise leader though, and I had faith that whatever he decided on would be the right thing to do. He always did the right thing.

The king sat up from his chair slowly and looked down at the table before him, as if considering something. He reached down and picked up his broadsword. He held it in his hand for a moment, deliberately turning the hilt in his palm before sheathing it across his back. The king reached down again to pick up his crown, but stopped. He looked over towards me.

"Would you mind telling Garus that I'll be a few more minutes?" he asked.

"Of course, my lord." I said and began to stand up.

A wry grin crept across his face, "You can stay out and listen if you'd like too."

He'd read me as if I were no more than a child. "Thank you," I blurted out stupidly and began to rush towards the door, embarrassed. I stopped abruptly though and turned back. "...my lord," I added quickly.

Horus just laughed. "Go," he said with a wave of his hand. "I will see you out there."

I exited the room hurriedly and made my way towards the balcony from which the king would be speaking. I cursed myself along the way for my incompetence. This was not the first time I'd forgotten to address him as my lord. I knew Horus did not care if anyone addressed him properly or not... but it was just that, proper. He just had a way of disarming you though, of making you forget that you were talking to your king. I consider myself an intelligent man, who is not easily influenced by others. But being around Horus always had that effect, it was a humbling experience to say the least.

The balcony was on the edge of the third story of the keep and was where the king gave all of his speeches. Its door was propped open against the end of the hallway. A thin curtain now separated me from the outside. I could hear the crowd down below, anxiously awaiting their king to speak. I poked my head through the curtain.

Prince Garus and Commander Askalon were both there, each standing in a position to flank Horus when he spoke, as they always did. I was surprised to see that Captain Willem also stood outside, directly behind the commander. He looked to be no better than at our meeting before.

"He's on his way, he'll be another minute or two," I whispered loudly to Askalon.

The commander looked towards me and nodded. He then walked to the center of the balcony and looked out over the crowd. I slipped back behind the curtain and leaned against the wall. Soon, I heard a heavy walking and turned to see the king coming towards me. He'd donned a chain mail tunic and over it he wore his bright, gold embroidered breastplate. His crown wrested atop his head and over his shoulders was draped a dark cape of magnificent blue threading. Now he looked like a king.

He caught my eye and grinned. "It itches," he said. "Have I ever told you that?"

I shook my head. "No, my lord, you haven't."

"Well it does," he frowned and scratched at his neck, "I should really have it looked at sometime."

"Are you ready to go then?" I asked.

Horus looked himself over and straightened his cape. "I suppose so," he said somewhat reluctantly. I could tell he was not looking forward to going out. I poked through the curtain once again and told Askalon that the king was prepared.

He barked an order and from outside we heard deep drums begin a steady beat. Their cadence echoed through the halls loudly, and silenced the crowd.

"Good citizens of Targonor," Commander Askalon bellowed loudly.

Horus silently mouthed the words as his old friend spoke.

"He always says the same thing," the king joked good-naturedly.

"It is my honor," Askalon continued, "to present to you..."

A chorus of horns began to sing out the royal fan fair, the crowd outside erupted into a frenzied cheer. I glanced at the king, who could not help but to smile in spite of himself.

"Your King... his royal majesty Horus Targonor-Furth!" the commander finished.

The king patted me on the shoulder and then made his way through the curtain as the fan fair continued to blaze throughout the assembly grounds. As he stepped out onto the balcony, the roaring cheers intensified. The overwhelming ovation was not insincere. The citizens of Targonor dearly loved their king and in these desperate times eagerly awaited any word from him.

He stood at the edge of the balcony before his subjects for several seconds. The fanfare stopped but the thunderous cheering only became louder. I could not make out much through the thin curtain, but I saw the king hold up his hands, as if to quiet the crowd. It had no effect. He smiled and let them continue to cheer for a small time longer, and then tried again. Still, they did not stop.

Horus' shoulders slumped slightly and he turned his head from the edge of the balcony, bringing a hand to his face. Prince Garus leaned towards his father but the king held out a hand.

"I'm fine." He said quietly, I could barely hear him over the crowd. "They aren't making this any easier though."

He took a long, deep breath and turned back to again face his subjects. He held his arms up highly and gestured for quiet, this time the cheers gradually subsided.

The king lowered his hands, letting them come to a rest on the polished railing and gazed out into the mass of people before him. He paused for a moment, letting the silence seep into every corner, and then began to speak.

"I must thank you for the welcome," he began, "It was overwhelming, to say the least."

His tone then turned much more serious.

"My friends... we have been through much recently. Within a matter of weeks, we were thrust from peace and stability into a state of war against an aggressor whom we did not even know. Our family, and our friends, went to do battle with this enemy and met with disaster. Many of our beloved now walk the long, starry road to the heavens.

"And while they go to regain their peace, we remain here. Our home, our great city of Targonor is being threatened... threatened by an enemy we cannot defeat. The army of the dead marches upon us... never stopping, never resting, and never yielding. Their evil relentlessly pushes north, through the lands of the Vulmane and now into our very homes.

"In two days time, the dead will arrive at the gates of Targonor," the king paused as startled gasps rose from the crowd, "They have come faster than we anticipated and they have caught us off guard. This does not leave you with much time. Tonight you must make haste and pack what you can. For tomorrow at sunrise, the final caravans to the north shall depart. Prince Garus will lead and will be charged with burning the fields, and evidence of any passage, behind you."

I saw Garus and Commander Askalon exchange an anxious look, but neither moved. A murmur began to run through the crowd, slowly growing in volume. The king continued.

"My friends, I have asked much of you. I asked you to fight this evil, and you did... valiantly. I asked you to abandon your homes, and you did so without complaint. Now I must call upon you to rise up one last time.

"The dead storm Targonor in two days, what they will find is a city abandoned and a trail leading north. That cannot be allowed to happen. The fires must be given time to burn and you must be given time to escape.

"It was not long ago, I pledged to you that so long as a single man remained in Targonor that I would not leave. That pledge holds true to this day. I call upon all able bodied and willing men to join me, and stay -- to buy the time that is needed."

My mouth dropped as a shocked silence fell over both the assembly grounds and the balcony alike.

"We will stay and we will fight...we will fight for the very survival of our people."

The king then slowly, so that all could see, reached across his shoulder and drew his sword. He held the blade high, pointing it upwards into the air.

"Let them come!" he called out to the stunned crowd, "Targonor will be waiting."

PART SIXTEEN

"Absolutely not," King Targonor said, "You are going."

"But father-" It was Prince Garus.

"We are not having this discussion, Garus," the king responded, "You will lead the rest of our people to the rebuilding site. That is an order."

Garus stood in front of his father, helpless. Tears began to well up in his eyes.

"You have much preparing to do, there's no time to waste arguing with me," the king continued, "Now go."

The Prince's shoulders stiffened. "Yes, my lord," he said, his voice making no attempt to mask his emotions. Garus then turned sharply and left the chamber, letting the heavy wooden door slam shut behind him.

It had been nearly two hours since King Horus Targonor-Furth had addressed those who remained in Targonor. He now sat back in his private chambers, thinking. He had removed the more formal attire and was again dressed in simple workman's clothing. Horus had requested that I come with him, though why I could not say. Commander Askalon was, of course, present, as was the haggard looking Captain Willem.

Captain Willem's presence was curious to me, but I was not about to question it as the need for me to be there was debatable at best. I strongly suspect the king wanted the captain there though because he commanded the largest force left in Targonor, the Red Blade Unit. They weren't the youngest or the quickest soldiers, but they very well may have been the toughest. Rastus himself looked no better now than he had before. The man was built like an ox, but his face appeared gaunt and pale. He did not look well. I wondered to myself if he was even capable of wielding the large sword he managed to carry around.

"I am sorry you had to see that," Horus apologized. "Garus is still young..."

"You have no need to apologize, my lord" Commander Askalon said quickly. "I'm more than twice as old as he and Prince Garus handled it better than I would have," he added with a slight grin. The commander sighed and looked towards the ground. "Marla and Heston are going to have a rough time of it."

King Targonor looked at his old friend, sympathy in his eyes. "Make sure you take some time to speak with them before they depart in the morning."

Askalon nodded. "I know, I will."

The King then turned to Captain Willem. "And you Rastus? Do you have family?"

The Captain looked up from the spot on the floor he seemed to have been fixated on. "No." he said simply, "I don't."

"Oh," Horus sounded somewhat surprised. "Well, if you have any friends you wish to bid farewell please don't forget to make time to do so."

"Thank you, my lord." Willem said, his response more courtesy than of genuine thanks. I will never know, but I strongly suspect the captain had no one to say goodbye to. I actually felt a bit sorry for Rastus.

"And you Pepran," the king said to me. "I am sure you have much packing to do. I apologize for wasting valuable time. You may leave if you wish."

To this point, I had had every intention of leaving, of fleeing to the north and starting again under the leadership of Prince Garus. I still do not know why I said what I did next. I was no warrior. Maybe it was out of admiration for the king. Perhaps I was just caught up in the moment. I don't think I will ever know.

"I am not going anywhere, my lord," I said, "I will stay and fight."

The king, Commander Askalon and even Captain Willem all looked at me with some surprise. Then the king nodded seriously.

"Very well, Pepran," he said, "That is your decision to make. Know though that if at any time between now and the evacuation tomorrow morning that you should happen to change your mind, I will think no less of you."

"You are very kind, my lord," I responded, "But I do not intend to change my mind."

I had just agreed to fight in a battle of pure desperation, in which even if we, somehow against the greatest odds managed to win, the best I could hope for was a quick death - yet I felt somehow liberated.

"Well," Horus said, as he stood up from the simple wooden chair he had been sitting in, "There is much work to be done. We had best get going."

"What would you have us do, my lord?" Askalon asked.

The king thought for a moment. "You can start making plans for our defense. You will need every minute you can get. Captain Willem, please have your men aid those who are leaving tomorrow in whatever capacity they can. Pepran, you can go with the captain."

The rest of us stood up and exited the chambers, the king right behind us. I do not know where he went, and felt it inappropriate to ask but I suspect he went to speak with his son. Queen Annabelle had passed years ago and Garus was the king's only son... his heir. Soon he would be king of a beat and frightened people, who would be desperate for leadership in their new land. I am sure this weighed heavily upon both Horus and the prince. Were Garus a lesser man I would have been worried, but the king had raised him well. I was confident he would grow into a revered and wise ruler, just as his father had.

I followed Captain Willem out of the keep and down into the city. Rastus did not speak much, had I just met him I would have thought he was angry at having to share my company but I know he had many other things on his mind. I certainly did.

The mood in the city was a somber one, it was quiet. People were out in the streets, but none spoke. They worked in an eerie silence as night fully enshrouded our home. Rastus lead me to a large barracks. Soft whispers blew through the inside of the building but stopped as hundreds of eyes focused directly on us as we entered the soldier's gathering hall. Then Willem spoke, his rough voice resounded throughout the long building.

"We are to aid those fleeing the city in whatever means we can. Taggart, take half of the men and head to the north side of the city, I will take the rest to the south end."

A plain looking, tall man who looked to be slightly older than me stepped forward and nodded. "At once, Captain" he said and ran off to go start collecting the men.

It took only a few minutes for Willem to have the entire unit ready to go. Taggart took half into the northern section of the city and I accompanied the rest to the south with the captain. We worked throughout the night, moving through the streets helping all those who needed it. It was both physically and emotionally exhausting work, and there were many teary thank you's.

I also learned many interesting things about the Captain that night from some of his men. Very few of them were good and I will not repeat them, but suffice it to say he was not as popular or respected by the men as his predecessor had been. I had no reason to dislike him though.

Despite how tiring it was, the night seemed to slip away quickly. A nervous anticipation fell over the city of Targonor as the remaining citizens frantically rushed to finish packing whatever possessions they could into their carts and wagons.

Just before sunrise, Captain Willem ordered us to start moving the people still packing towards the gates of the city. Many were not finished, and had to be dragged away from their homes. It was not easy work and was done in a grim silence.

As the sun began to peak over the horizon all those who remained in the city had gathered at the eastern gates. One of the Red Blades told me the

king was to speak before they left. Shortly after, a brief commotion in the crowd signaled his arrival as he was spotted climbing the stone steps to the top of the eastern gate.

He was again dressed in the regal looking armor he had spoke in the day before. His sword was slung across his back and his crown caught the first rays of light that were beginning to stream into the city, reflecting them brightly into the crowd. Commander Askalon and Prince Garus followed him closely. I looked over to Captain Willem, who stood near me. He watched the three ascend the steps intensely, through his deeply bloodshot eyes.

The crowd quieted as the king reached the top of the gate where all could see him. Garus and Askalon stood in their usual places, flanking the king. He waited for a moment, and then began to speak.

"Yesterday I asked much of you. I asked you leave your homes and start anew, and I asked you to be ready by sunrise today... and you were. Even now, in our most desperate hour you continue to make me proud.

"It has truly been an honor greater than I could ever say, to be your king for all these years. But now, you go to rebuild in the north. You will have new homes, a new city, new families... a new life. A safer life. And to lead you to it, you will have a new king. My son and my heir, Prince Garus Targonor-Furth will lead you to your new lives.

"You will face many obstacles and countless challenges, but you will prevail. Because you will wield all the glory that is Targonor. The dead may raze our city, but they will never kill our spirit. It journeys with you to the north and it is there in the rocky cliffs that you will build a new Targonor.

"So now I bid you one last farewell. For every passing breath, the dead come closer. You will need all the time you can get, so I ask you now to go. To follow your new king north and restore the spirit of Targonor, so that it may grow and thrive where not even the dead can touch it. Go now, and may the gods quicken your steps."

When the king was finished speaking he turned to his son. Slowly, he removed the crown from his head and deliberately, so that all could see place it on Garus. Horus placed a large, mailed hand on his son's shoulder and gave him a sad look. He said something then, but I was too far away to hear. The two then embraced tightly until Horus backed away. Garus, the king, slowly turned and descended the long stone steps to the gates.

PART SEVENTEEN

After the remaining citizens had left the city Commander Askalon broke what was left, about a thousand men - some trained military, many not -- into groups and put us to work. We made preparations non-stop for the next two days. I don't think I had more than an hour of sleep the entire time, strangely though I did not tire.

It was odd seeing the city I had grown up in abandoned. It was not just that it was quiet, but that it was a still silence. No merchants hawked their wares from the street side and no children ran playing through the alleys. I had never seen my home this way before... and it was unsettling.

Further unsettling still though, was the constant presence of the dead. We could not see them, but we knew they were coming closer. The field fires had created large, dark billows of smoke. Many times the wind picked up and sent waves of ash crashing through the city. The day sky was beginning to darken around Targonor and it provided us some small measure of comfort knowing that the fires were burning well, the orange glow from their flames barely visible through the thick smoke.

I worked under Captain Willem, he and the Red Blades were among the few of the trained military left in the city and we constructed and placed several ballistae and catapults. We then tested them and set discreet markers in the fields outside the city so we would know when the dead entered our range.

Others were put to work digging pits outside the walls, reinforcing the southern gates, mixing pitch, destroying the stairs inside the larger buildings and constructing makeshift ramps from roof to roof. The plan was to stay on the rooftops once the dead breached the city walls and stall them with small ambushes.

King Targonor, Commander Askalon and Captain Willem would all lead separate forces based on the roofs that would attempt to split the dead's ranks and coral them each into separate sections of the city. The plan was well thought out for such short notice, and I was somewhat surprised to hear that it had been Willem who had come up with it.

It was late afternoon on the third day when the first was spotted. It was one at the beginning. It staggered rigidly out of the brush into the fields surrounding the city. Soon though, many, many more began to appear, seemingly materializing out of the smoke.

A deep horn echoed through the city, alerting all to the fallen army's presence. I rushed back to the barracks and donned the chain mail shirt and skullcap I had been given and grabbed my longsword. For the first time in the past three days the city seemed alive, men ran every direction desperately finishing the last of their preparations. From the barracks, I made my way back to the southern walls and onto the parapets.

A deep sinking feeling formed in my stomach when I gazed out over the wall. For as far as I could see, both east and west, the dead emerged into the fields. They marched in no particular order towards us with a grim and unwavering determination that sent chills coursing through my body.

Soon, the bulk of our forces were lined up on the parapets. The king commanded the soldiers on the wall, while Askalon was in charge of the catapults back on the city ground. Willem and the Red Blades manned the ballistae. Even with the thick smoke billowing in from the north, we could see a goodly ways across the fields. While they were visible, the dead were still out of our range, so we waited.

With each passing second my dread grew as their numbers swelled. They began to funnel together, into a large, loose group that lurched steadily towards our gates. I could begin to make out their twisted and rotting features. I had heard the dead described many times, but no words could quite prepare me for their ghastly appearance.

I heard Askalon bark an order from behind me. There was a great groaning of wood and a massive stone whizzed by far over my head. It sailed over me in a long, sweeping arc and crashed into a small group of the fallen, rolling several times before coming to a stop. Two were obliterated instantly, crushed into the dirt by the heavy boulder. Several others were tossed aside or pinned to the ground.

"I'd say that puts them just about in our range," Horus bellowed from atop the wall, "Fire away, Commander."

With that, a barrage of boulders was sent careening over the city's walls. The dead made no attempt to avoid the impacts and several direct hits were scored. Dozens of the attackers were flattened into the ground as the giant rocks rolled through their lines. The enemy ranks quickly filled again though as still more of the dead poured into the fields.

"Captain Willem," the king called out, "your turn."

Willem shouted an order and the Red Blades fired off a volley from their ballistae. The massive bolts rained down upon the dead, skewering many into the ground or other attackers. Another round from the catapults followed, the boulders again rolled through the enemy lines crushing all that lay in their path.

The alternating barrages continued for some time as the sun set over Targonor. Soon it was dark, torches lit the city but the smoke from the fires to the north had created a dark cloud over the surrounding area, obscuring any moonlight. The dead were packing in around the southern walls. They were now no more than a few hundred paces from the gates. Captain Willem and Commander Askalon joined the king on the parapets. I was barely within earshot.

"If there weren't so many of them this might actually be going well," Horus observed grimly.

Askalon nodded in agreement. "They don't seem to care how many casualties they suffer. I don't know how many we have killed, I don't know if they can be killed, but we've at the very least we have de-habilitated hundreds."

"That isn't bad for an afternoon's work," the king replied. "I suppose they'll try to surround us now."

"We could slow them considerably if we had some light," Captain Willem observed dryly.

"Now is as good a time as any," Askalon added.

Horus grinned. "Very well, why don't we light things up a bit?" He turned. "Archers," the king commanded, "ready your bows!"

A long line of small flames ignited along the top of the parapets as several scores of bowmen lit the ends of their arrows.

"Ready!" the king shouted as the archers drew back their bowstrings. Horus looked back to the commander and Willem. "Is it wrong that I am having a tremendous amount of fun?" he asked.

"Absolutely not," Askalon answered with a perfectly straight face.

The king nodded. "Good," he said. "Fire!"

Brilliant streaks of flame darted through the air as the burning arrows descended upon the horde below. The dead, however, were not the targets. We already knew arrows were of little use against them. The oil we'd soaked portions of the field with earlier, however, took to the flames quite nicely.

It had been spread across moderate sized patches of the ground a few dozen paces apart around the entire southern perimeter of the walls. Stacks of timber had been placed in the patches to ensure the fires would burn through the night.

The grounds before Targonor's gates were lit brightly as almost instantly hundreds of the dead were consumed by fire. Many staggered from the blaze, flames crawling over their bodies, only to collapse a short distance later. But to my horror, even more seemed to shrug off the effects of the fire, even as it slowly burned through what remained of their rotting skin.

The fire did succeed in providing us with illumination though. We could see our enemies clearly now. Portions of the horde seemed to be breaking off to the east and the west - surely to surround the city. What remained surged forward away from the flames towards the southern walls. All the while, the horde's numbers grew as more continued to lurch into the fields from the surrounding area. For as far as I could see in all directions, staggering heads bobbed up and down in the tall grass as they worked their way towards the city, all in a nearly perfect silence.

The stench was nearly unbearable. I tried to breathe through my mouth but it seemed I could even taste the smell of burning flesh. I saw several men around me gag or begin to vomit.

Captain Willem stood stone-like on the walls, gazing out at the attackers. "Who is leading them?" he asked aloud.

Askalon peered over the edge and scanned the area. "You're right," he said, "they're splitting to surround the city but I don't see anyone directing them."

"Whoever is commanding must be staying beyond our sight," Horus observed. "Nevertheless, they are splitting. Commander, take the east gate, Willem take the west. The fires should keep them away from the north gate, they were almost at the walls last I heard."

Rastus and Askalon both nodded and rushed off to gather their respective troops. Captain Willem led the Red Blades to the west gate to Askalon took a contingent of men to the east. I was told to stay at the southern walls with the

king, and took over for one of the commander's men helping to load the catapults.

For the rest of the night I worked in shifts, pushing the heavy slabs of stone into the massive basket. Occasionally we would instead load it with a barrel of oil. After launching them I could sometimes see the tips of flames leaping from over the wall and judging from the reactions of the archers on the parapets, it was easy to tell when a good hit was scored.

We continued to bombard them for the remainder of the night, they tried futilely several times to gain entrance to the city with grotesque battering rams but each attempt was thwarted as boiling pitch was dumped over the walls onto those below. As the sun rose a new unit was brought into take our place and we were told to try to go get some sleep in a nearby building. I was exhausted, but ventured up to the top of the walls before taking my leave. The early morning sun shone through the smoke, illuminating the battlefield with a hazy glow.

The fires were still burning strongly, though the dead simply maneuvered between them now. The ground was littered with charred or crushed remains, whether their former owners were up and walking somewhere in the horde, I did not know. The dead themselves now surrounded the walls completely. Their numbers were astounding. The fields below were a literal sea of bodies but I was pleased to see they had not made much progress on the walls over the course of the night. And while that fact should have comforted me I was instead worried. They had seemingly taken whatever lay in their path with ease up to this point... surely a wall wouldn't be able to stop them.

After a few minutes, I headed back down to the empty building with the rest of my loading team and tried to get some rest. It was impossible to sleep, even in my state of exhaustion the sounds of the catapults continually launching, or the ballistae firing their giant wooden bolts kept my eyes open and the gnawing presence of the dead just outside our gates kept my mind alert. Finally though, I was able to drift off.

I awoke a time later to a loud crashing sound. Men were shouting outside. I sat up quickly and looked around. Many of the other men were waking up and gazing around with the same look of confusion as me. Then we heard the sound again, we collectively jumped to our feet and raced towards the door.

PART EIGHTEEN

I barely had my sword out of its sheath when I burst out into the city. It was light outside and looked to be about mid afternoon - it was hard to tell through all the smoke, which now formed a sooty haze of ash around Targonor. Frantic shouts were coming from the southern walls as men scrambled to man their positions.

One of the ballistae which had been mounted on the parapets sat in shambled pieces at the base of the wall. Three armored men lay in a crumpled heap below it, they were not moving.

"Take cover!" I heard a voice yell. "Here comes another!"

Without thinking, I dove to the ground and covered my head just in time to see a massive ball of flame come hurling over the top of the wall. It slammed directly into the building I'd just left, and with a mighty crash blasted through the structure's sturdy wall, leaving a gaping hole as the side of the building began to fold and buckle inward. Brick and mortar were sent flying in all directions. A piece of debris rapped me sharply across the back. I grimaced in pain as the wall collapsed in on itself before me.

A large chunk had been torn from the building. The now exposed insides lay in tattered ruin. Several of the men who were not lucky enough to have made it out lay lifeless among the rubble, a thin layer of dark dust settled over their broken bodies. Near the center, lay the large, smoldering ball of flame. Its fire was weakening, but the heat was still far too intense to go nearer. Thin wisps of smoke hissed upwards as debris that fell into the flames was singed out of existence. The ball clearly had a solid core of some sort, but of what I did not know.

Then I heard the king, "Destroy the catapults!" he roared from atop the walls. Then the entire area burst into a frantic movement. I ran up the stone steps to the parapets. Another great blast crashed into the city's wall and shook the ground beneath me. I struggled to stay on my feet and clawed my way to the top of the steps.

The dead still swarmed the ground outside Targonor. The ground was thick with them, making it nearly impossible to distinguish one from the next in the dim light. The fires still burnt, though they had lessened in intensity significantly. Their swirling ash rained down upon the crumbled remains of several crude battering rams that lay next to the gate. Another was being pushed through the seething horde towards the city. Several hundred paces out two

bulky catapults were being silently loaded with more large balls of flame. The dead handling the scorching missiles seemed indifferent to the horrific burns being inflicted upon them.

"Help me with this," a soldier urgently called to me. He was fumbling with a ballista bolt, trying to load it into the firing mechanism. I rushed to his side and helped him slide it into place, the jagged steel end pointed menacingly into the horde below. The soldier rushed behind the heavy ballista and began to turn it on its swivel.

As he aimed a volley of large rocks were fired from the city ground behind me. They flew outward towards the enemy's siege equipment. Several fell short and crashed into the horde, leaving long streaks of crushed dead in their wake. Many more though, continued over the bulk of the dead armies and slammed into the catapults, blasting them apart as a shower of splinters exploded into the crowd around them.

A deep, resounding boom echoed through the wall as the attacker's battering ram met with our southern gate. It was crudely constructed from the trunk of an old gnarled tree, and pushed by a score of the dead. It was on fire, several burned arrows protruded from its side. The flames had consumed the top half of the old tree, withering and charring the bark. I looked to the soldier behind the ballista.

"I know," he said quickly, "help me turn it."

Working together, we pushed the ballista as far to the side as it could go and pointed it downwards.

"Try to hit it in the center," I said, "The fire will have weakened it."

He took careful aim and fired. A loud metallic clang rang out as the bolt sped whistling through the air. It sheared through one of the dead completely, cleaving it nearly in two and ripped into the battering ram. Blackened bark sprayed outwards as the bolt removed the majority of the top of the ram and tore a deep crack into the trunk.

Down the wall, another metal clang rang out as a second ballista fired. The bolt drove itself directly into the crack, splintering the ram into two as the archers delivered a volley of burning arrows into the dead surrounding it.

The soldier leaned forward onto the ballista and exhaled deeply. "That was close," he said. I nodded in agreement briefly, and then turned to pick up another bolt.

Over the next four days, there were many such close calls. The dead seemed to grow only stronger with each passing day and our defense grew more frantic. Their catapults demolished any building inside the city within their range and severely weakened our walls. Still, the southern gates held strong.

Captain Willem and the Red Blades defended the western gates, they fared much the same as us. It was on the evening of the fifth day we heard a low rumbling from the east gates. I was hurriedly stacking ballista bolts when the ground began to shake, it was barely noticeable at first and had it not been for the deep rumble that accompanied it I may not have noticed. I looked back to the east, the smoke had almost completely obscured any sunlight now and a growing layer of ash blanketed the entire city.

I could not see anything and I really did not have the time to do much else, so I turned back to grab another bolt. The dead were pushing several more rams up towards our gates and we needed to destroy them. It was then when I heard the explosion. I felt a searing heat on the back of my neck and spun back around to see a brilliant plume of yellow and red flame dancing over the eastern gates, illuminating the dark city.

The king immediately began shouting orders. Runners were sent to confirm what we all suspected.

"Don't stop," Horus called out, "not until we hear word."

Minutes later, a soldier came running along the wall. He was bleeding, and his arm was swollen and broken. "My lord," he shouted, "They've breached the walls. We cannot stop them."

The dead were inside the city.

"Fall back!" Horus commanded. The defenders melted away from the walls, and sprinted inwards towards the buildings that remain untouched by the attacker's catapults. I found myself in a crowd of archers surrounding the king, the runner with the broken arm next to me. Horus shouted commands as we ran, and groups began to split off and enter buildings.

A ways into the city, we burst into a small warehouse. The large room that dominated the main floor was nearly empty, its stores having been depleted in the days prior. We raced up a flight of stairs and then climbed a ladder onto the flat roof. A smooth layer of snow-like ash covered the top of the building, with more continuously raining down upon us.

A movable ramp constructed of thin sheets of wood and rope bridged our roof to that of the building just across a small alleyway. We raced across it and began to pull the ramp in behind us. A pulley on the roof held a large sturdy wooden cabinet several feet above the door below.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Horus panted.

"I don't much know, my lord," the runner responded. "I just saw the explosion, a piece of the wall knocked me down and when I got up the dead were pouring into the city. I turned and ran as fast as I could to warn you. I am sorry, my lord."

The king shook his head. "You did well..." he looked at the runner inquiringly.

"Vassik, my lord."

"You did well, Vassik," Horus said. "What of Commander Askalon and the rest of the men?"

"Many were killed or wounded in the explosion, my lord. The rest were fighting to push the dead back when I left. They were not succeeding."

"And Askalon?"

"I am sorry my lord, but he was taken in the explosion."

Horus let out a short breath and cursed. He started to say something, but was cut short.

"My lord!" a voice called out. Horus spun around, trying to locate its source. "Over here," it called again. I turned to see a man standing on a roof across the street. He was waving his hands wildly, trying to get our attention. He was wearing a Red Blades uniform. "Over here!"

The king spotted him. "I see you," he called out. "What news do you bring?"

PART NINETEEN

"The Red Blades have withdrawn from the west gate," he shouted back over the street. "We are positioned on the rooftops and await your order."

"The eastern defenses are lost," Horus choked up a bit, "Askalon is dead. The east gate is wide open and the southern will not hold long undefended. My forces are largely in tact and in place. Stay off the streets and try to stay hidden."

"Is that all, my lord?"

"Captain Willem will know what to do, just instruct him to head towards the center of the city."

"I will, my lord." the soldier replied, "Be safe."

The king waved as the Red Blade turned and ran back over the makeshift ramps to the western end of the city. Horus breathed deeply. "I guess we had better get started then," he said.

"What would you have us do, my lord?" one of the men asked.

"Unfortunately there isn't much we can do other than bide our time. We will stay low on the roofs so as to remain undetected when the dead flood the city. Most of the stairs have been destroyed, save for a few warehouses such as this one. We will lure the dead inside, seal the entrance and then burn them. If we get separated, remember that any building with a pulley like that," he pointed to the device holding the cabinet above the door on the ground below, "has oil placed inside of it and can be burned. Break the barrels, spread the oil, then lure the dead in, lower the barricade in front of the door and then set the building ablaze. Use the ramps to move on to the next roof," the king finished, "just make sure to pull them in behind you."

I will admit I was skeptical when the king first told us of the plan, that was until I saw it work. Within a matter of hours, the city streets were completely overrun with the dead. They slowly staggered down alleys and into buildings. We lay flat on our roof, only occasionally peaking over the edge to see what was there. Finally, the king knelt up.

"Its time," he said.

A small group of men slipped back down into the building to spread the oil. Once they returned Horus waited a few moments, and then jumped to his feet. "Now" he yelled.

Instantly the rest of us were standing - the archers with their bows drawn and aimed. They began firing down upon the dead below. The streets were thick with them, and the sharp points of the arrows bit deeply into their rotting flesh. It did not take the dead long to surround the building and soon more began appearing out of alleys and side streets and making their way towards us.

The door to the warehouse was beaten down quickly and they poured inside. I could hear them beating on the walls beneath us, trying to find a way up. A soldier to my right stood over a torch, striking his sword with a small piece of flint. After a few tries, a spark caught the reeds and the torch began to burn.

More and more of the dead pushed their way into the entrance, until finally those outside could no longer enter. Horus pulled open the trapdoor leading down into the building.

"Quickly," he said, "drop it."

The king slammed the trapdoor shut as soon as the soldier had tossed the torch in. Horus then drew his sword from its sheath and sliced at the tightly bound rope on the pulley. It snapped easily and the large cabinet suspended over the warehouse's doorway plummeted towards the ground. With a sickening crunch, it crushed two of the dead beneath and settled directly in front of the door.

The king grinned at me. "You didn't think that would work," he said.

I struggled to find a response. But before I had time to worry too much about him reading me again I noticed smoke seeping out from the other side of the building. "Smoke!" I said, pointing at it frantically. So much for saving my dignity.

Horus nodded. "Let's get off this roof. It won't be long before it collapses entirely."

We carefully pushed the ramp over the alley to the next building and dashed across, pulling it in once again behind us. We repeated the process until our small group of soldiers was several buildings away.

Once we stopped, I stared back at the warehouse. Flames leapt from its windows and thick smoke poured out from every opening. Horus was right though, I couldn't believe that had actually worked. Over the next few hours, I began to notice more and more similar fires off in other directions. The other groups were lighting their own buildings, and I suspected the Red Blades were doing much the same several blocks to the west.

For the remainder of the day, and long into the night we repeated the process, filling and then burning a handful more buildings. The dead knew where we were, they simply could not reach us. We traveled in small groups that could move quickly. Several times dead had managed to find their way onto the rooftops, but we either just avoided them entirely or pushed them back down if they numbered small enough.

It was nearing morning when they brought the catapults into the city streets. I had been fortunate enough to have been able to sleep for a few hours during the night and was now on watch with several other soldiers.

It was very dark, the only source of light being the heavily obscured fires that still raged on to the north. I could not see the dead on the streets below very well, but I knew they were there. I could hear them shuffling about the base of the building.

In the distance, I heard a deep grating. As if something very heavy were being dragged along the stone roads. Then, down the street a ways, just within my vision, I saw a bright glow. It was a flame. Frantic shouts echoed through the streets as it suddenly jerked back, and then shot out towards a building. It exploded into its target and disappeared with a deep rumble. I rushed to wake the others as I began to hear more crashes off in other directions.

In only a few moments, we had woken the rest of our group. They were groggy and still very tired but became alert quickly.

"We need to move," Horus stated, "If they're firing on other groups we have to assume that they will be firing upon us too. We're lucky we made it farther into the city than most yesterday."

"Which direction?" one of the soldiers asked, "Keep heading inward?"

The king nodded. "Yes," he said as another loud crash sounded out in the darkness. "Hopefully we'll be able to meet some of Willem's men near the

center of the city. We need to move now though, that last one was much closer. Did anyone see it?"

"No, my lord." I answered, "But I think it came from the other side of the block and down a few buildings. It was very close."

Horus briefly peeked over the edge of the roof. "We can't risk torches, but we won't be able to go far or very fast without light," he observed. "We had better go now."

And we did. For the rest of the night we quietly slid our ramp over alleys or walkways and slipped across as silently as possible. We had not gone very far when a bright flame flared up near the building we'd been resting on and then smashed into the wall. The entire ground beneath us seemed to shake as the roof was brought down, collapsing inwards. I exhaled nervously and looked to the king.

"The joke is on them," he said, flashing a quick grin. "That building was going to be torn down anyway."

The morning came much too fast for my liking, and our progress slowed substantially. There still wasn't very much light penetrating the thick clouds of smoke that hovered over the city, but even in the dim glow of the rising sun we had to be much more careful when we moved.

The dead continued to demolish the city around us. Their attacks during the night had been devastating, dozens of buildings lay in complete ruin and our already meager forces had sustained heavy losses. We saw only one other group of soldiers hiding on the roofs that day, and they were too far away to communicate with.

By midday, the decision had been made to stay put until nightfall, when it was safer to move about again. To be completely honest, I don't know if the dark even affected the dead at all, it did give us a small amount of comfort though.

We decided to stop on one of the marked buildings. Something had caused the rope holding a heavy stack of wooden boards above the door to snap though, so as a trap the building was useless to us but it was nice to know that no dead could gain entrance to the ground level without first taking care of the barricade.

We were nearly to the meeting point, but there were no sign of Captain Willem or the Red Blades. Horus insisted that they'd meet us the following day but I don't think many of us really believed it.

The truth was that we were in our sixth day of battle. We had fought for nearly a week. Emotions had been high before, and there had not been much time to stop and think. While lying down on the rooftops in complete silence waiting for nightfall, there was not much to do other than think. For me, and most of the mere two score of men who remained with us, that fact began to sink in along with a realization of what would come next. We had all known it would happen, but before there had been that slim glimmer of hope that maybe, maybe we would win. But with the dead now thick among the streets our fates seemed inescapable, and though no one spoke of it, a cloak of sorrowful dread had fallen over us.

Horus knew it. He tried to keep our spirits up, making sardonic observations with that wry grin. He felt it too though, and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was nearly dusk when we heard movement from inside the building. It was faint at first, it sounded as if something had bumped the ceiling directly below us. The noise caused many of us to jump, startled. The king gestured for us to remain quiet and drew his sword, we all followed suit.

Then we heard it again, it was definitely directly beneath us. A small tuft of ash sat slightly displaced near the center of the roof. The coating was inches thick by now and a moderate sized crease had formed in it.

"Trapdoor," Horus said quietly.

I tensed as another bump deepened the crease in the ash. We all stood in silence, swords drawn and bows aimed. A short burst of wind caught a dense plume of falling ash and sent it cascading through our ranks.

Whatever came through that door was not going anywhere without a fight. My mind raced as I tried to think of a way the dead could have entered the building without us noticing. The back door had been boarded up and sealed before the evacuation and the front had been blocked for as long as we had been there. A shiver coursed through my body as I realized that the barricade was not meant to keep more dead out, but to keep whatever was beneath us in.

Another strike thumped the door from below, this one more forceful. We waited. A series of short blows followed, as if it were being rattled from beneath. After a moment, it stopped abruptly and for several long seconds there was nothing. I held my breath and leaned in closer, trying to make out any movement in the dying light.

Suddenly, the wooden bolt lock splintered cleanly in half as the door was jolted open from a tremendous blast below. The trapdoor snapped back against the roof and thumped forcefully into the ash.

It was dark inside. I strained to see anything. Then I heard a curse. The dead had never cursed before. A mailed gauntlet emerged from the darkness, followed shortly by another. I watched as a large, haggard looking man in full mail armor with a heavy sword strapped across his back pulled himself onto the roof. I finally let out my breath, relieved. I could not completely make out his face, but I knew to whom it belonged. It was Captain Willem.

"Rastus!" Horus exclaimed in a hushed tone as he rushed to help pull the captain through the door. With the king's help, Willem squeezed through the trap door and collapsed back onto the roof. He did not look very well, even for Rastus. Tattered mail hung loosely around several deep cuts across his torso.

"Are you all right?" The king asked quickly, "What happened?"

"I'm fine." Rastus held up a hand. "My men..."

"Your men?" Horus replied, "What about them? Where are they?"

Just then, another set of hands appeared in the door. I looked down to see a dirty, blood streaked face squinting back up at me. It was the tall man I'd met the final night of the evacuations. I helped him up through the opening. In total, six of the Red Blades were with Willem. They were all in better shape than the captain, but not by a very wide margin.

We tended to their wounds the best we could. Unfortunately, there was not much we could do other than bind them tightly with small rags.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Horus asked the captain again, eyeing the large gashes across his chest.

Willem grunted. "They look worse than they are."

The king did not look convinced, but he let it drop. "So what happened to you? Where are the rest of your men?"

"These are the rest of my men," Willem said sourly. "They surrounded our building with catapults during the night. We got across to the next roof over but they just blew that one up too."

"But how did you get here?"

"Well after our roof collapsed, there weren't many places to go but down." He sighed, "We lost most of the men then. They fought well though, they fought very well." Rastus pointed to the tall man, "Edonus saw a hole in the rubble and we rallied around it, thinking it would be an easier position to defend..." Before he could finish, Willem erupted into a fit of coughing, specs of blood dripped from his mouth.

"Turns out it was an entrance to the aqueducts," Edonus cut in quickly, finishing for the captain. "We scouted around a bit, and the dead don't have much of a presence down there."

"Well that is a bit ironic." Horus observed, "The rotting corpses don't like the sewers. There is an entrance to them below this building then, I presume?"

Edonus nodded. "Yes, my lord. And it gets better, it's pretty much a straight shot from here to the north wall. From there we could get to the old armory."

The king grinned, gaining enthusiasm. "Its back is against the city wall, and its own walls are the thickest in Targonor next to the keep. How close will the aqueducts get us?"

"The closest we could feasibly get out would be across the street, my lord."

Horus paused a moment, considering the options. "Well," he said finally. "I still like that better than just sitting here waiting for the catapults to come."

"We thought you might." Willem coughed. "How many men do you have?" the captain asked, peering around the roof.

"Forty-eight counting you seven," the king answered. "We saw a group down this street a ways this morning though. They looked to have another two scores, at least."

"I know the group you're talking about," Willem replied grimly. "They fell in the early evening. We watched from a sewer grate. There wasn't anything we could do."

The king gazed out over the streets and shook his head. "Damn them," he said quietly.

Within a matter of minutes, we were making our way down into the building. I dropped through the trapdoor onto a creaky wooden floor and looked about nervously, I could not see much.

"Don't worry, we cleared the building," Edonus said from behind me, sensing my discomfort, "There's nothing in here."

Captain Willem led the way back to the staircase. If his wounds were bothering him, he didn't show it. The stairs themselves had been destroyed. The building was almost completely bare, even the walls had been stripped of any furnishings. Only a few barrels of oil stood near what would have been the top step. Instead, a knotted rope was tied to the banister and dangled down to the ground floor.

"That must have been hard to do in the dark," Horus quipped, eyeing the rope.

"It took a while," Rastus replied dryly.

After we had all made our way to the main floor, Willem spoke up. "The only thing separating us from the dead right now is the front door, and a stack of wood," he whispered, "Sound also carries a long ways in the aqueducts. From here on out we must be as quiet as possible."

We nodded our heads in understanding.

"And stay close together once we are down there," he added, "it is very dark and we cannot afford to light torches. Step carefully."

We followed him silently to the back of the building, where an opened grate revealed a sturdy ladder leading down into the darkness. I waited my turn and then began to slowly descend, carefully locating each rung with my foot before setting down. I was blind here and it terrified me. Eventually, my foot hit solid ground. The sewers were dank and much cooler than the surface.

The tunnel was narrow, but widened considerably when it met with the main sewer. I clasped the shoulder of the Red Blade in front of me to keep myself with the group. The soldier behind me did the same.

Time seemed to drag on in the darkness, especially at our slow pace. I don't know for how long we walked. Several times the tunnel opened into a larger, wider room. I could not see the walls, but could feel them expanding outwards. It left me feeling exposed and uncomfortable. Unfortunately there wasn't anything I could do about it but stay quiet and keep going.

Once, we passed almost directly under a grating to the streets above. The sun had long since sank below the horizon, leaving the surface nearly as dark as the aqueducts. Nonetheless, we could hear the dead shuffling around over our heads, and prayed that they could not hear us as well.

After what seemed like hours, the walls opened into another wide room. We continued to trudge through as silently as possible, taking slow and deliberate steps in our boots and holding our weapons close to ensure they made no unwanted noise. The darkness was impenetrable, even having been in the sewers for a fair amount of time I could still not see past my nose. Suddenly, we stopped.

I stood perfectly still, afraid to breathe. Nobody said a word. There was silence. I wanted to ask why we'd stopped, my mind was certainly coming up with plenty of reasons why on its own and none of them were very pleasant. But I remained quiet. I wasn't going to be the one who broke the silence. Then I heard it.

Walking, it was close.

At first I thought it was just one of our men, but we were walking single-file and it was coming from our side. The steps were irregular. It scuffed and sounded as if whatever it was, was dragging its feet along the hard ground. A few paces ahead of me I heard a sword slowly slide from its sheath. I desperately wanted to do the same, but was petrified to make any sort of noise.

Instead, I waited. My chest burned, I needed to breathe. Carefully, I slowly exhaled and drew in a deep breath without so much as making a sound. The steps were coming closer. They couldn't be more than a dozen feet away, ahead and to my right. Then I felt a sharp tug from the soldier behind me, before he let go of my shoulder. There was a painful cry several feet behind me. Instantly I heard more swords being drawn, quickly this time though and suddenly there was movement all around me.

"Taggart" I heard Willem's voice bark out sharply, "We need light."

There was a faint spark somewhere in front of me.

"I'm trying," I heard Edonus reply.

There were several more screams, much louder this time. I could hear the unmistakable sounds of a blade tearing into flesh. I frantically spun around, trying desperately to make out any movement. There was no one in my immediate range, yet all around me I heard the sounds of battle. Hands shaking, I drew my sword and held it guardedly in front of me, probing the darkness.

As I turned, it hit something. Before I could react my blade was slapped away violently, nearly out of my hands. I staggered back a step, falling down. I caught myself at the last moment with my free hand. It gripped tightly onto the gritty, cold ground. As I pushed myself back up I felt a sharp wisp of air blow by over my head.

I leapt forward, lunging blindly into the darkness with my long sword. With a revolting sucking noise it plunged into something in front of me. I withdrew the blade immediately and chopped it downwards in the same direction. I again felt it sink into something.

"I got it!" Edonus exclaimed from somewhere behind me as a flickering light suddenly flooded the room.

I was staring directly into the rotting face of one of the dead. Its decaying body was littered with knots and sinewy strips of ligament hung string-like, from its frame. It wore ragged remnants of ring mail and clutched a small axe tightly in one of its lifeless hands. Its eyes were sunken deeply into its skull, and were glossed over with a pearly white. The creature's mouth had rotted away completely, exposing a grotesque jaw that seemed to be locked eternally into a twisted grin.

It had a gaping wound near the center of its torso, and my sword was embedded several inches deep into its neck, separating a good deal of the head from the body. It stared at me intensely, radiating hatred. Its bony fist began to rise, bringing the axe up with it. Instinctively, I pulled my sword from its neck and summoned forth every bit of strength I had to bring my blade down upon the creature again.

My long sword ripped through what little remained of the neck and removed a sizeable portion of the shoulder as its head casually twisted, then

rolled down off its back. In a stunned disbelief, I quickly stepped out of the way as the rest of the body toppled forward onto the ground.

I whirled around. The room was thick with the dead. At least a dozen of our men had already fallen, and lay still on the cold ground. With the light, it became plainly evident that we were outnumbered, the dead funneled in from two small side tunnels faster than we could cut them down. All around me, our men fought fiercely.

Then the light suddenly dimmed, I looked back towards Edonus. He had dropped the torch and had a stunned look on his face. He stared down wide-eyed at the blade protruding from his chest and fell to his knees, one of the dead stood behind him menacingly. Immediately, Willem was there. With his large sword, he tore into the creature savagely, lobbing off both its head and an arm before it crumbled to the ground.

"We can't win this." Horus shouted, "We must find a way out."

I scanned the room. It was large and had four exits, one on each wall. The two smaller tunnels on the sides we both clogged with the dead and going back the way we came wasn't really an option. That only left us with one choice.

I dashed to where Edonus had fallen and picked up the torch. I pointed it towards the hallway leading to the north.

"We've got to go this way." I called out as I felt something jab painfully into my leg. I looked down to see one of the dead on the ground. It had been severed in two at the abdomen and was dragging itself towards me. Its frigid hand gripped my lower leg tightly, squeezing with a surprising strength. I jerked my leg backwards, but was unable to break its hold.

Another appeared to my right. It lurched towards me in a deathly silence. I waved my sword at it, trying to keep it at bay, but it had no effect. It drew closer as the other slowly pulled itself onto me, reaching upwards towards my throat. Then I heard Horus' voice.

"You can't kill Pepran," he said matter-of-factly, as a sword blade suddenly split the dead latched onto me's skull into two from behind, "He's got the torch."

The creature wilted off me and back onto the ground. The king flashed me a quick grin, and then turned his attention towards the dead to my right. In a

few slices, he had separated the fiend from its head. He kicked the body backwards as it fell away into the darkness.

Horus looked back to me. "Quickly," he said, "go."

Without hesitation, I took off towards the northern tunnel, jumping over the corpses of both the dead and our soldiers alike. A small number of our men were already at the entrance, they were in formation around Willem and fought back any of the dead who attempted to get past. They parted briefly and I rushed through them, with a few other men directly behind me.

I turned to see the dead tightening their grip on the room. Only a few soldiers remained separated from our group and they were falling quickly. A wave of the dead surged forward out of the side tunnels. They spilled into the room, forcing any remaining combatants towards the center. Willem and the others struggled to keep them back.

I heard Horus curse loudly from somewhere in the fray. Two of the dead were suddenly sent sprawling into the wall as the king emerged from the crowd perhaps a dozen paces to our left, he was wounded. The dead were filling in around him quickly. He looked back at us and frowned.

"This is a bit of a mess," he shouted to us as he beat away several attacks.

The horde pressed in on us tightly, we were losing ground, slowly being forced back into the tunnel. The king was almost out of sight.

"My lord," Willem called out as the man next to him fell to one of the dead's attacks, "Hold on."

Horus' back hit the wall. He parried several blows, then I lost sight of him. I heard a scream and pushed forward into the line, swinging my sword wildly in front of me. I caught view of him again. A spear was lodged wickedly in his upper torso, a look of anguish spread across his face as he tried to pull it free while fighting off the attacks. With a violent jerk, he ripped it from his chest and plunged it into the skull of the nearest undead.

"Go," he roared. "Go now!"

Willem cursed loudly and barked an order. The soldiers began to fall back into the tunnel. A wave of sickening nausea swept through me. "We can't just leave him!" I yelled, trying to push forward.

Rastus turned, forcing me back and locked his gaze onto mine. "There's nothing we can do for him now. Don't be a fool. Run."

I stood there shaking, I wanted to cry.

"Run!" Willem said this time, there was a dangerous edge to his voice.

With a sinking dread in my stomach, I turned back into the tunnel and began to run. The soldiers broke off their combat and raced after me. The flickering torchlight danced along the walls as we left the dead, and Horus, trailing behind in the darkness.

PART TWENTY

I collapsed against the wall. Tears streamed down my face. The world around me was a haze, I couldn't think. I vaguely remember someone pulling me to my feet, and running again. I was aware of my feet pounding on the hard ground of the tunnel, but little else.

The next thing I can clearly recall is standing under a sewer grate. Willem was there, he looked up carefully into the street for a moment then back to us, shaking his head.

"It's too dark," he said in a raspy voice, "I don't hear anything, but that doesn't mean they aren't there."

I still clenched my sword tightly in my right fist. The torch was gone though. I looked around at our group. We were now only eleven strong. Just two of the Red Blades besides Captain Willem remained. Nearly everyone was injured and bleeding from somewhere or another, though no one complained.

"So what do you think?" one of the Red Blades asked.

"We don't really have much of a choice," Willem responded, "We can't stay here. Once we're on the surface, the armory is just across the street."

"What if there's dead inside?"

Willem grunted. "Then we'll make them more dead." The captain looked in my direction, "Are you all right?"

I nodded, attempting to regain my composure. "Yes," I replied, "I'm sorry-"

Rastus shook his head and cut me off. "It's fine. I've seen trained soldiers do worse. You wanted to save your king. You never need to be sorry for that."

The words were nice to hear, but I still felt like a fool. Willem squinted up at the grating. "Removing that is going to make a lot of noise," he observed, "So once we do it we've got to be quick. As soon as we are on the streets, we have to assume they will be after us. I've got the feeling we're all that's left."

I sheathed my sword as Captain Willem and the remaining Red Blades began to push on the grating. It screeched and moaned in protest, but eventually gave way and flopped out onto the street, landing noisily. Rastus frowned.

Without wasting any time, he jumped upwards and pulled himself up through the hole. Once we he was through we heard a startled exclamation followed by a sickening crunch. We all froze anxiously until Willem's head appeared over the opening.

"That was close," he said with a hint of a grin.

One by one, we all quickly made our way up onto the street. It was still very dark outside, but I could clearly make out the headless form of one of the dead lying in the ash-covered street. What was more disturbing though, was the fact that the entire area was littered with footprints. At the rate the ash rained down from the sky, they looked to be fairly fresh.

Once everyone was up, we darted silently across the street to the old armory. It was an old stone building that had been constructed directly into the northern walls of the city. It had three stories, and its roof sat level with the parapets. It served as little more than a guardhouse now, but for generations it had been the city's main armory, almost a keep in itself. The large front doors were made of a heavy wood, and darkened windows lined the building's sides.

Rastus reached the doors first and tried to open them, but they didn't budge.

"They're not locked," he said. The captain looked down at the ground before him. Piles of ash had blown up against the bottom of the door. In places, it must have been over two feet deep. "It's the ash," he remarked urgently, "clear the ash away from the door."

I cautiously looked over my shoulder as we rapidly pushed the piles of ash to the side. I couldn't see the dead through the darkness, but I knew that they were there and making their way towards us.

Finally, Rastus was able to jar the doors open and we rushed inside. The captain closed the door behind us and slid the heavy wooden slab into place, locking it securely.

"Who has the torch?" Willem asked in the darkness.

"I do," one of the soldiers answered.

"Light it."

"Of course, Captain."

After a few sparks the reeds once again caught, and we had light. We were in a large room, with vaulted ceilings. A staircase lead upwards to the right and a hallway lead off in another direction beneath it. Some simple wooden furniture was placed throughout the room.

"That door won't hold for long." Rastus said, "We need to find something else to reinforce it with. "If I remember correctly, there should be some tools in the back room." He started down the hallway and looked back over his shoulder. "Stay together."

We walked cautiously through the hall, weapons drawn, peeking into each room we came across. They were small offices and supply closets for the most part. Near the back of the building, the hallway opened up into a larger room with several sturdy looking worktables and benches. Willem poked around under one of the tables for a moment, before dragging a heavy looking wooden crate out from beneath it. He set it on top of one of the benches and opened the lid.

"Excellent," he said. He tilted the crate so that we could all see it. The wooden box was full of large metal nails and spikes. "I'm glad they didn't take all of them," he murmured.

We quickly secured the rest of the building, and for perhaps the next hour, we broke apart furniture, and after being able to locate a few hammers began to reinforce the door. We could already hear the dead gathering on the other side. They pounded loudly on the thick wood.

When we were finished, one of the soldiers looked back to Captain Willem. "Now what?" he questioned.

"Now we hold them off," Willem answered.

The soldier nodded in understanding. "Until what?" he asked solemnly.

"Until we can't."

For the rest of the night we took turns sleeping. None of us really wanted to, but Rastus insisted, saying that we would need all we could get. The truth was though, that I was exhausted. I hadn't eaten or slept in almost two days and once I lay down, even on the hard stone floor it did not take me long to fall asleep.

I was shaken awake a time later by a somber faced soldier. "You need to come look at this," he said to me.

I followed him to the roof. It was day now. Though with the smoke it was impossible to tell what time. Willem sat off against the parapets, brooding quietly. The other soldiers had gathered at the edge of the building. I walked up behind them. It was obvious what had their attention.

For as far as I could see, the streets were packed tightly with the dead. Their catapults were busy demolishing the city in the distance, working their way ever closer towards us. Fortunately, our door still held strong, though I could already see battering rams being rolled through the streets in our direction. I nearly threw up.

I backed away from the edge a few steps, and looked back to Willem. He appeared to be lost in thought. "Well," I said walking over towards him, "I guess they know we're here." I tried to force a weak grin, it didn't quite work.

"They'll be inside by nightfall," he said simply. The captain did not seem like he was in the mood to do much talking, so I sat down a few steps away quietly.

"What time is it?" I asked after a while.

"It will be dark in a few hours," he answered. Apparently, I had slept for a while. There was not much to do other than simply wait. There was no real equipment to be had in the armory, though a few barrels of oil had been discovered in one of the storerooms. They now sat in a row just beside the open-

ing leading back down into the building. The ladder had long since been pulled out and now lay stretched across the far side of the roof.

So we sat quietly as night again descended upon us, each largely unmoving. I thought about my childhood. Memories of my family and playing in the buildings or alleys that were now teaming with the dead or lying in ruin raced through my head and many of the others' as well, I suspect. Shortly after the sun had fallen, the attack began.

At first it was just the rams, they pounded on our doors again and again—with each strike, weakening our defense. But it did not take long for the catapults to join in. The first strike was lobbed high into the air and arced sharply before plummeting down onto the roof. It exploded into the stone with a fiery rage, crashing through into the next level, bringing a pile of smoldering stone down behind it. Three of our men were taken in the blast and another lay pinned below the heavy rubble beneath us. Down to seven.

Before the second had time to fire, we heard a loud splintering from the front of the building. The doors had been opened. A second ball of flame from the catapults exploded onto the corner of the roof, sending a shower of stone onto those down below. I braced myself against the parapets, waiting for the next strike.

Instead, I saw one of the dead begin to rise through the rubble below. It lurched up towards the roof. Carefully finding purchases in the stone, it pulled itself upwards. One of the soldiers charged towards it, sword drawn. As another ball of flame arced up above the building I tried to shout a warning, but it was too late.

It slammed into the stone just next to him, and in a violent spray of fire, both he and the undead creature were gone. More of the dead were beginning to reach the roof now, and yet another fiery boulder came flying up from the front of the building. It peaked and then crashed through the greatly weakened roof, taking three men with it. A large slab of stone was blown into one of the barrels of oil, spraying it everywhere.

It ignited almost instantly and a blaze of fire swept over us as a portion of the roof began to collapse. This was not going very well. Willem stood several feet to my side, and one of the Red Blades lay unmoving on the ground a ways in front of me. I did not know if he was unconscious or dead. Either way, the flames would soon consume him.

The captain struck out with his large sword ferociously as one of the dead neared him, cutting it neatly in half. Two more though quickly took its place and another crawled up through a hole to his side. I rushed up behind it and gripping my sword in both hands, swung at the back of its neck. It lurched forward and fell as my blade severed its spinal column. Willem had already dispatched the other two by the time I looked back up.

"Is it just us?" he shouted over the roar of the fire.

"I think so." I yelled back as he cut down another of the dead, removing it from a leg before kicking it back down into the fire.

Then another volley from the catapults came raining down upon us as two more blazing boulders crashed into the building, sending a sharp fragment of stone ripping painfully into Willem's thigh. He cursed furiously and threw his sword to the ground.

"That's it," he growled as he marched over to one of the barrels of oil and hoisted it over his head. He took off towards the front end of the building, narrowly avoiding an attack from one of the dead. I scrambled to where he'd been standing to pick up his sword. It was exceptionally heavy. I balanced it over my shoulder and ran after the captain.

Willem raced towards the edge of the roof, it looked as if he intended to jump off. I began to call out to him but he stopped short and instead hurled the barrel off into the street. As it sailed through the air towards one of the catapults being loaded below I realized what he was doing. I couldn't help but smile wickedly as the barrel exploded onto the catapult, the ball of flames in the basket instantly igniting the oil as it seeped over the machine's frame and onto many of the surrounding dead.

He looked back to me. "My sword," he called out. I tossed it to him, it clattered onto the ground at his feet and he snatched it up just in time to cut down a group of dead emerging onto the roof. "Mind your back," he roared at me.

I spun around in time to catch the very tip of a sword. It nicked into my abdomen painfully, etching a long narrow cut down my side. I cried out and lunged towards the rotting attacker, catching it in the throat with my blade. It jerked back as my sword followed through and I slid the blade through the remainder of its neck.

I turned back towards Willem, swinging my sword at one of the dead emerging before me. I could see Rastus over its shoulder, a large number of the dead were crowding in around him but it did little to slow his vicious assault. He swung his massive sword in broad strokes, sometimes shearing through two of the attackers in a single strike. The captain roared out savagely as one of their swords plunged into his back. He lurched forward as another cut deeply into his right arm.

Willem recovered quickly though and spun, cutting down both attackers. I ducked under a blow and struck out at the creature in front of me. I kept swinging until it toppled over. I could hardly see Rastus now, the dead had formed a wall around him and were pressing in tightly.

Suddenly, another of the fiery boulders sailed up above the building. It streaked high into the air and then began to plummet down towards us. I heard Willem cry out in a rage as an entire line of the dead before him crumpled to the ground in a heap. Seething, he cleaved through a half dozen more in mere seconds.

The ball of fire exploded into the building directly between Rastus and I. I vaguely remember seeing Willem and the crowd around him being blown back out over the edge of the building. Then I felt dizzy, as if I were falling and hit something hard.



When I awoke, it was to a crippling pain my left arm and chest. I drew in a deep breath, ash tumbled into my mouth and I shot up coughing violently. I was sitting waist deep sunk in ash in front of the northern gates. My arm was broken and my entire chest was a deep purple, pain coursed through my body when I moved.

The northern gates remain untouched and there was no sign of the dead near me though debris from the armory was scattered all about the area. I coughed, spitting out blood and looked up to the city walls. A large billow of smoke rose from just over the walls.

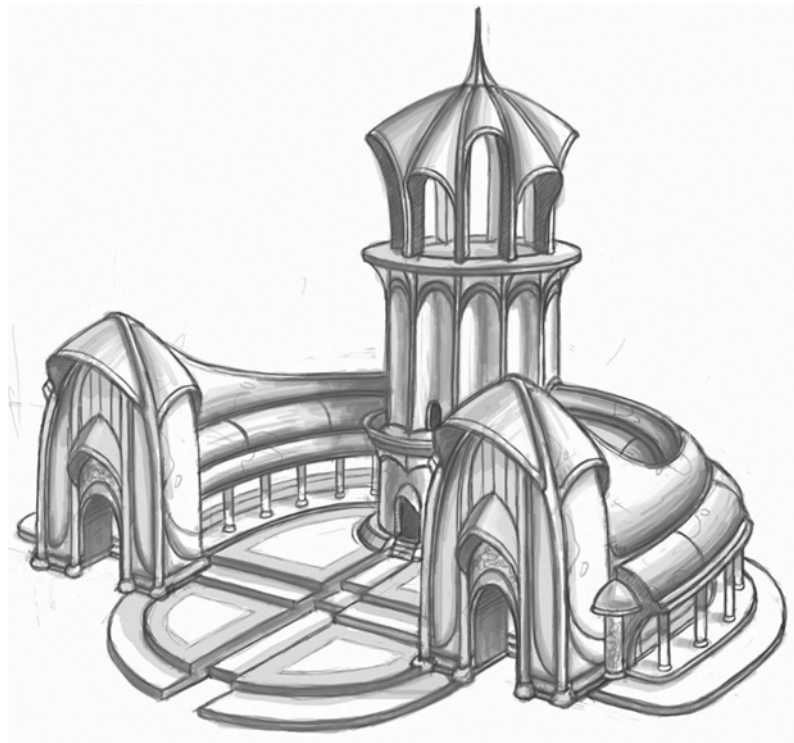
I propped myself up on my good arm and looked at the ground surrounding me. The fall should have killed me, had the soft ash not been plastered thickly onto the ground it no doubt would have. Weakly, I tested my legs. They were bruised but did not appear to be broken. Slowly, I brought myself to my feet. I took a small step and was hit with a wave of dizziness. When it

passed, I noticed something metallic partially buried sticking out of the ash beside me.

With an audible groan, I leaned down, pulled my sword from ground, and looked to the north. The fires still burned and would for some time to come, deep black smoke rose into the sky, dropping ash back down onto all below as it slowly floated by.

We had needed to stay alive for three days. Commander Askalon, King Targonor and Captain Willem all died, to keep the dead occupied for three days, so that the rest of Targonor could escape. With barely a thousand men, we had given them a week.

I took one last glance back at the ruined city that had been home for my entire life, then took my first painful step north. I had a long way to go.





ASSORTED JOURNALS AND MEMOIRS

BE IT A PERSONAL DIARY OR A SCHOLARLY JOURNAL OF OBSERVATION, RECORDED MEMOIRS CAN BE JUST AS TELLING OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S ENVIRONMENT AS IT IS OF ITS AUTHOR. THIS SECTION IS A COLLECTION OF JOURNALS FOUND SCATTERED ABOUT TELON, GIVING A UNIQUE GLIMPSE OF ITS POPULATION.

HARDIGAN MCCRANE

FIRST ENTRY

I am not normally one to keep any sort of journal. In fact, this is the first time I've ever actually done anything like this. I felt though that the journey I'm about to embark on was worthy of recording. I am a fur trapper by trade, and have never gone much farther than a few days hike outside of the village.

However, tomorrow I venture east into the highlands and will travel until I reach the coast. Many have warned me of the dangers in the area, but the chance of coming home with a full load of pristine furs from a nearly un-hunted land is too great. I will not be going unarmed either. I am also bringing Tursik and Adian, my two favorite hounds. They are good dogs, and will not only help guard my camps but will aid me greatly hunting.

At this point, my only real fear is that I know many gnolls make their home along the eastern coast. I will go out of my way to avoid them though and should I encounter some will do my best to make sure they understand my intentions are not hostile and I am merely there for furs.

I have a strong horse and a wagon but it will serve just as storage, I will be doing most of my traveling on foot with my dogs along side me. I will be leaving before dawn, so I had best get to sleep now.

Hardigan McCrane

THE HIGHLANDS

The going is slow, unbearably so at times. I am three days removed from the village. My wagon of course broke an axle yesterday afternoon after running over a tree stump. Fortunately, I planned for such an event and was able to repair it. Though if it breaks again I'm not sure what I will do, so I have decided to take my time.

In the end, that will probably be the wisest choice anyway as the only cause for my initial fast pace was my excitement. Tursik and Adian keep me company though. They have taken to tormenting the horse. The dogs run right in front of it as it pulls the wagon then dart away before they are stepped on. They seem to find it funny. I wonder how long it will be until one of them gets stomped.

We marched steadily uphill until late last night when we crossed into the highlands. I don't foresee any problems but from here on out I must keep an eye open at all times incase we happen upon any gnolls. It's not just stumbling by one or two that worries me, but rather crossing paths with a large group of them. My fears are probably completely unfounded though.

At this rate it will probably take another week to reach the coast. With any luck, my trip will continue to be uneventful.

Hardigan McCrane

STRANGE DISCOVERY

The gnolls are still all over the shore near the wreck. I left Tursik and Adian in camp today while I made the rounds checking my traps. The morning's catch wasn't bad, and should be enough to keep me busy until night falls. I am beginning to get very curious about that wreck though. I stared at it from the safety of the ledge for a long while today. It has many odd markings that I wish to get a closer look at. I will stay in the area for a few more days incase the gnolls leave.



The gnolls appeared to have finally lost interest in the wreckage. I waited a day to make sure they were not coming back, and then headed down to the shore to have a look at what remained.

The dogs watched from the ledge as I waded into the cold water. Granted, I'm no sailor, but what I saw was unlike any ship I know of. The front of the vessel was painted with the mark of a red bird that I've never seen before.

I didn't find any bodies in the water, if there were any I'm sure the gnolls took care of them. I did find a coin though, out farther than most of the gnolls were going among a mess of broken wood and seaweed. I've had traders from every city on Thestra buy my furs and never before have I seen a coin like this.

Its looks like copper, so I don't think it will be worth very much but I don't intend to sell it anyway. Its old and worn looking, but the engraving on it looks to be a small fortress of sorts sitting directly under a large, shining, sun.

When I get home, I will show it to some of the village elders. Hopefully one of them will be able to tell me from where it came. I am very curious now, to say the least.

Besides more broken and splintered wood from the ship, there was nothing else new to be found in the water. This has proven to be quite an interesting diversion, to be sure, and will give me something to think about for the rest of my trip.

Hardigan McCrane

SHIPWRECK

The gnolls are still all over the shore near the wreck. I left Tursik and Adian in camp today while I made the rounds checking my traps. The morning's catch wasn't bad, and should be enough to keep me busy until night falls. I am beginning to get very curious about that wreck though. I stared at it from the safety of the ledge for a long while today. It has many odd markings that I wish to get a closer look at. I will stay in the area for a few more days incase the gnolls leave.



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Hardigan McCrane

RETURN HOME

My wagon did not take near as long as I had originally thought it would to fill. Even with the slight delay while I waited for the gnolls to leave the wreckage, I have already stuffed every chest, sack and bag I have to nearly its breaking point. Avoiding the gnolls was not overly difficult either. It is, of course, a possibility that I was simply lucky but nonetheless I will plan to come back to these lands next season.

I have been studying the coin I found in the shipwreck every night by the fire. I have wracked my brain endlessly staring at its engravings but I still cannot decipher the language inscribed upon it. I find myself becoming more interested in getting back to the village and searching for more information on where it came from than in selling my furs. Although I would be lying if I said the potential money for those skins didn't excite me too.



I arrived back at home yesterday. My journey back through the highlands was largely uneventful, though I did have to pause for nearly a day while a band of gnolls passed. I also could have sworn I saw a Vulmane through the trees in the distance, but it moved too quickly and was gone before I could get a clear view. I don't know what a lone Vulmane would be doing out there -- maybe the same thing I was. Then again, it could have simply been a large wolf too.

More importantly though, as I suspected, the fine quality of my skins has not gone unnoticed. Nearly a fourth of my trappings have already sold. That was much quicker than I expected. For now, I have stopped selling any more skins. If I travel further to the west in to the lands of the Elves, or even the Halflings and Humans, I can get a much better price.

After arriving back in the village I took my coin directly to the oldest man I know, an old farmer named Harkin. I figured if anyone would know what it was, or at least knew someone who might it would be him. Unfortunately, he didn't recognize the coin but he did tell me to go speak to an old friend of his - a man whose name I did not recognize who lives alone a few hours walk north of the village.

But by then it was late and already dark so I decided to wait until morning. So today, just after sunrise I set out to find the man. A few hours later, following Harkin's directions very carefully I arrived at a small cottage. I found the old man behind the house in a large garden. He looked at me somewhat apprehensively until I introduced myself and explained that Harkin had sent me. He eased noticeably at that.

I told him my story and he listened patiently as I showed him the coin. When I had finished, he shook his head apologetically and said he did not know from where the coin came. I was disappointed, but to be honest I would have been more surprised had he actually known. As I was leaving he said something that did surprise me though.

"Wise Regus in New Targonor - He once told a tale similar to your own. Though he had no coins. You may wish to speak with him."

I guess I will be traveling to the lands of the Humans sooner than I had originally planned.

Hardigan McCrane

JOURNAL OF GEDDY BILSTRO - RESIDENT OF RINDOL FIELD

“A VISITOR FROM FALGARHOLM ARRIVED LATE YESTERDAY”¹

A visitor from Falgarholm arrived late yesterday. He sat outside the tavern and had us bring him drinks for most of the night. He was quite tall, but a splendid fellow. What an excellent sense of humor he had! I asked him how the weather was up there and he made a joke about burning down my house and eating my cat. I should visit this Falgarholm someday.

“THE LARGE FELLOW FROM FALGARHOLM...”

The large fellow from Falgarholm is getting ready to leave right now. We're playing a game where I have to hide from him or he'll pulverize me. I'm not sure what pulverize means, I think it may be his word for tag. I don't want to be it! I have such a good spot, he'll never find me.

1. See also “The Travel Journal of Burgen Bralund” on page 352 for the Falgarholm traveler's perspective.

JOURNAL OF GINNA DALTON

PAGE 104

My most recent experiment was a success! I blended a common Horsetail with the new strain of Meadowsweet I found along the shores of the Beranid. The result is a new plant, which I am calling Greenleaf for lack of a better name. Best of all, I've found that substituting Greenleaf for Meadowsweet in each remedy that calls for the latter, yields better and more pronounced effects in each case.

PAGE 131

I planted some Greenleaf along the Beranid amid the native Meadowsweet. My hope is that it will grow well and become a viable addition to our craft, Gloriann willing.

PAGE 150

Some travelers from Leth Nurae asked me for samples of Greenleaf. A traveling merchant from Targonor told them about our new herb. I gave them some from my most recent harvest and I also showed them the fields along the Beranid. I taught them the use of the herb and told them they are free to harvest as much as they need provided no field is made barren. The fruits of the earth belong to all.

JOURNAL OF RODNAR ELDIN - HARBORMASTER

“A SMALL SET OF ISLANDS WAS DISCOVERED TODAY...”

A small set of islands was discovered today off the northern coast. It is hard to say how far away they may be. Very rarely is the sea as clear as it was today, and they were only in view for a matter of hours. No ship we have, however, is strong enough to take us there. So for now, we must wait.

“THE KING HAS GENEROUSLY GRANTED US...”

The king has generously granted us the requested funds to attempt to build a ship capable of making the voyage to the islands that we have now seen numerous times. Plans are being drawn as we speak, and with any luck construction will be underway within a matter of weeks.

“THE SHIP IS NEARING COMPLETION”

The ship is nearing completion. Even though I helped design it, and oversaw the creation of the plans I am still in awe of its size. The vessel is far and away the largest the city has seen. There is a part of me that has begun to worry if it may be in fact too big, though I know no ship as diminutive as the majority of our fleet is capable of making such a voyage. Especially through such treacherous waters.

“SAVE FOR A FEW MINOR SETBACKS...”

Save for a few minor setbacks, construction on our new ship continues brilliantly. We had some early issues with our wood warping, but after close examination we were able to determine the problem and right it.

“CONSTRUCTION ON THE SHIP HAS BEEN COMPLETED”

Construction on the ship has been completed. We have named it The Islander. There has been an overwhelming amount of volunteers to crew the vessel. This is a fortunate luxury, as now we can pick and choose the very best at a minimal cost to ourselves.

“IN TWO DAYS TIME, THE ISLANDER WILL DEPART”

In two days time, The Islander will depart. We have tested and planned for every conceivable situation that may arise, I pray the crew will reach the islands and return home safely. Interest in our ship has spread through the city and we are expecting a sizable crowd at the docks to see the crew off.

“THE ISLANDER HAS DEPARTED”

The Islander has departed. The docks were flooded with spectators this morning to see the crew off. The royal family was even in attendance. As the excitement begins to wear off though I find myself becoming more and more worried for the safety of both the crew and the ship.

“IF OUR ESTIMATIONS WERE CORRECT...”

If our estimations were correct, The Islander crew should reach their destination today. I anxiously await their safe return and the news that they will bring. It was agreed before their departure that upon their arrival they had up to seven days to explore before returning home.

“YESTERDAY WOULD HAVE BEEN...”

Yesterday would have been The Islander's eighth day since reaching its destination. I lay in bed most of the night worrying, both for the crew and myself, I have much personal stake invested into this venture and stand to gain or lose a great deal. Obviously though, the safety of the crew is paramount and I was overjoyed to awake this morning to see their masts on the horizon. They will be in the dock by nightfall.

“THE ISLANDER HAS RETURNED”

The Islander has returned! They tied off in dock no more than a few hours ago. The crew was excited, but tired. They were given quarters to rest themselves and will make their official report tomorrow. However, from the brief conversations I have already had I have learned that they discovered not just one but an entire chain of small islands.

“IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THESE NEW ISLANDS ARE RICH...”

It seems as though these new islands are rich with natural resources. High quality lumber and stone especially, among other things. And while they did not have enough time to begin a mining excavation all indications point to the ground below the surface being just as rich as the land above.

“WHILE THERE WAS THE NORMAL WILDLIFE...”

While there was the normal wildlife one would expect at any such place, the crew was able to discover no intelligent inhabitants on the islands. I suppose this is a good thing, we have had enough surprises recently and do not need any new neighbors with whom tensions could arise.



JOURNAL OF DARION FURTH

“I HEARD JERIC CAUSED A RUCKUS WITH THE SAGES...”

I heard Jeric caused a ruckus with the Sages earlier this week. If there is one thing that man is good at, it's stirring up trouble. I must admit though, every time he takes action, there is a part of me that wants to cheer like a little boy.

“I ADMIRE JERIC TARGONOR FOR STANDING UP...”

I admire Jeric Targonor for standing up against an organization that has gone unchecked for too long. But yet, I worry. For even one such as he, the Sages Arcane can be a very powerful and dangerous enemy.

“THE TENSION BETWEEN JERIC AND THE SAGES ARCANE...”

The tension between Jeric and the Sages Arcane, I fear, is growing worse. It is no secret Jeric has a disliking for the bureaucracy and politics in the organization. I wonder what he will do about it though. What can he do?



JOURNAL OF LADY GAVENDA

CHAPTER II

I lost another man-at-arms today in a skirmish with these creatures of the elements. Fehn Tabb was burned alive by a horrific creature of fire before I could get to him. As it was, I was fortunate to escape with only a few minor burns and a melted sword. We need to retreat to Ahgram before i lose the rest of my warriors.



We've gathered a few weapons forged with the power of the elements from that old tomb, I gave them to a few select soldiers, but I will keep my own sword; I trust and feel comfortable with it. In our campaign south though, these new arms we've acquired will prove most useful. Let us see how a creature formed from fire enjoys a weapon enchanted with the power of water. That's magical logic even we single-minded warriors understand.

CHAPTER V

A group of rogue dark elves have ambushed our weakened army today. Guard Captain Masori and I were briefly separated from the rest of the soldiers when we were attacked, and five of the elves engaged us while their main force attacked the army proper. We managed to kill them all, though Masori took a bolt in her thigh. She will recover in time, and thankfully that was the worst injury among our fighters. The dark elves will learn their cowardly tactics do not make them a match for our soldiers!

THE PEOPLES OF THESTRA AND ITS ENVIRONS BY THELUS DURON

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

HALFLINGS

No other people share a longer lived friendship with the humans of Thestra than that of the Halflings. From the original founding of Willowroot, across the river Beranid from Targonor, each race found a kinship in the other that still exists to this day.

Just as those of Targonor were forced eastward, the Halflings as well left their home on the Beranid, Willowroot. Many outlying Halfling farms were overrun to quickly to allow their owners a chance to flee. Those that lived closer to the Beranid were able to escape, along with the caravans leaving Targonor and made their way east, over the Widow's Peaks and just past the stronghold of the dwarves.

Religion does play a role in modern Halfling society, albeit a small one. Many customs have evolved around the worship of deities; however there are not many Halflings who have dedicated their lives to serving their gods. I witnessed a harvest song to Nobbon as well as a rather bawdy and drunken revelry led by worshippers of Tharridon. Clearly religion is not a heavily formalized affair in Rindol Field, at least nothing like what is experienced in the Temple of New Targonor.

DWARVES

I was struck by the normal activities that carry religious significance for the people of Bordinar's Cleft. Smithing an exceptional weapon or brewing excellent ale is a form of worship to these dwarves. It is accepted that the gods are part of their lives and responsible for both their fortunes and failures.

Most dwarves are stocky and quite muscular. Most all of the men sport beards. Fantastical tales of bearded dwarven women is certainly a fiction as I never witnessed a single dwarven woman with any type of facial hair. A typical dwarf reaches adolescence in his late 20's and reaches full maturity around 30 to 35 years of age. It is not uncommon to find dwarves nearing 200 years old prior to death.

VULMANI

While the Vulmani are not entirely wolf-like, the head, feet and hands are unmistakably lupine. Each Vulmane I have witnessed is covered completely in fur. Even though my observations of this race has been limited, i have seen a variety of fur colors - various shades of brown are most frequent but gray, black and white are not uncommon.

It appears the Vulmane extend great reverence to their Chieftain. This is not a hereditary position but tied to the individual's strength and leadership ability. The position of Chieftain is secured through single combat and challenges can be made by other Vulmani within the society. During my time in Vulmane, I have heard several tales of unsuccessful challenges to the leadership of Sharpclaw Gormak.

HALF-GIANTS

Most half-giants stand between eight and nine feet high. One characteristic seen in almost all subjects is a more muscular build in comparison to humans. This is obviously a trait passed down through their giant-folk ancestors.

We observed a shooting star one night during our time in Falgarholm. There was much commotion in regards to this spectacle. It appears the Highland folk call a shooting star "Rurkogd's Spear" and anyone privileged to see it is blessed by the god. The Guardian or The Provider, as Rurkogd is also known in this society, is said to distribute his fortunes to his worshippers by throwing his mighty spear across the heavens. I am told young half-giants have been known to follow the path of the spear across the land in hopes of finding the actual projectile.

ELVES

On the fifth day of the week, at sundown, I followed a procession of elves through Leth Nurae. As we moved through the city, more elves joined the march until we reached the bank of the river. In unison, the elves knelt and began to sing. It was the most beautiful of sights to behold. Later, I asked Velereth what this occasion meant. He replied that Leth Nurae mourns and remember the memory of its ancestors that were lost in Leth Verael as well as those who perished in the battles with the Orcs and Goblins.

I witnessed a unique rite of passage while in Leth Nurae. When a youth of Leth Nurae Decides on a career path, they are asked to make a journey to the Bay of Despair. The trip is made alone and with minimal supplies. The only required item is a ceremonial water urn. Upon reaching the bay, they fill the urn with the water of the sea that claimed their ancestors. The urn is then emptied into the pool in Leth Nurae. It is believed that this will enable the spirits of their ancestors to dwell in the elven home.

On my second night in Leth Nurae, I happened upon a group of young elves sitting in a circle around one of their elders. The elf, probably the oldest elf I had seen, was telling a story that enraptured the younger elves. I asked Velereth to translate for me and was fortunate to hear a wondrous and fanciful take about a land, far to the south, with a sea of sand, scheming advisors, and the war that their ambition started. Although Velereth faltered in his translation at times, I was able to determine this story is used similarly as instruction tales in New Targonor are used. The truth of the story matters less than the lesson it imparted of unchecked ambition and its consequences.

TRAVELS THROUGH THE KINGDOM BY THELUS DURON

FROM THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR

TURSH

I recently visited Tursh on Market Day. Ordinarily, it's hard to tell one village's market from another's. However, because it is so close to New Targonor, Tursh often has special visitors in town for the festivities, which are then celebrated with extra pomp and ceremony.

Dordas Deren, the First Priest from New Targonor, was one such visitor to Tursh. During my visit, I watched as he performed the Firstwater Blessing. From the turnout for the blessing, it was clear that Iasern is attracting new followers about as quickly as Tursh is attracting new residents.

As I wandered through the market stalls, I found an array of local products such as barely, corn and Tursh game hens, the latter having become a favorite course on menus of many of New Targonor's citizens. As it happened to be shearing season at the time I visited, I was also treated to ample displays of wool. Many of the traders and artisans had specially traveled to Tursh to purchase the sheared fleece.

The first sight that assails visitors to Tursh is the towering statue dominating the courtyard. This monument to Loric Targonor, armored and raising his sword in salutation, inspires the strong sense of loyalty the people of Tursh have for the line of Thestran kings born of Loric himself so many years ago. It also symbolizes the resolve Tursh, and the entire Kingdom, has to persevere under all circumstances, no matter how dire, just as Targonor himself did during the years following the Breaking.

RINDOL FIELD

Rindol Field, so named for its original settlers, Jessip and Mara Rindol, is not overly large. Some would describe it as a modest settlement. It is certainly nothing like the busy streets of New Targonor. Most of its inhabitants live on small farms surrounding the city proper. However there are those mainly craftsman, who prefer to live closer to the center of town.

The quaint houses and cottages are constructed of wood or light stone. Natural roofs are not an uncommon sight as many of the houses are dug into the hillsides. The feeling that strikes one most when visiting the settlement is the warmth and familiarity.

Upon my visit to Rindol Field, I was struck by how sociable and jovial the Halflings are. I was invited to supper, and then to stay the night, by one family. After a delightful meal, a round of story telling ensued. I heard many enjoyable tales including one about a farmer, Halp Grimbo, and his battle with a giant ant. I even contributed my own story as well to the gathering. However, I was unprepared for the barrage of questions I received after the telling. Everything from my heritage, the streets of New Targonor, the lands I have visited previously, and the contents of my knapsack were subjects of many queries. The people of Rindol Field are certainly an inquisitive bunch.

I came upon a most impressive sight near Rindol Field. A massive dam, built of worked stone and designed by the denizens of Bordinar's Cleft, helps to regulate the seasonal flooding and allows the Halfling farmers, further downstream, to work their fields with suitable irrigation.

BORDINAR'S CLEFT

Although usually reticent in allowing outsiders into their wonderful city, I was welcomed by the Mountain Dwarves into Bordinar's Cleft. In part, my guide's introduction of me and my undertaking helped to expedite the process. It appears that there is some curiosity in how I view the other races I have encountered. Most of the dwarves I spoke with held very rigid views in regards to any who are not dwarven.

Upon entering the halls of Bordinar's Cleft, I noticed first the polished grey stone walls shining, reflecting the light of torches attached at regular intervals around the perimeter of the first vast chamber. Ore veins marbled the walls interrupting the high sheen from time to time. Various gems, still held fast in the stone, only add to the beauty of this city.

One experience not to be missed in Bordinar's Cleft is a visit to a tavern. Even as one approaches the chosen establishment, it is possible to hear the sonority of dwarven voices singing along with the steady cadence of tankards and utensils being pounded upon the tables. The consumption of ale seems almost ritualistic in its practice. Even with my sparse Dwarvish vocabulary, I was able to enjoy the songs immensely. The ale was as superb as the music.

FALGARHOLM

I noticed that many of the foundations of the buildings within Falgarholm are from a much earlier period than that of the structures sitting atop them. In some cases, even some earlier existing walls were used in the construction of new halls and dwellings. It is apparent that Falgarholm has a long history of being inhabited, stretching back into the years before the founding of the Kingdom of Thestra.

LETH NURAE

Most believe the elves of Leth Nurae to be aloof to outsiders. However, my experience has been that they are more elitist and arrogant than aloof. Perhaps their long lives lead them to disdain other races. Whatever the reason, it was clear to me upon my visit that I was tolerated but not necessarily welcome into their city.

Velereth, the elf assigned to guide us through Leth Nurae, stood 6 feet but was slender in comparison to a human of the same height. He had very fair hair, almost white under certain light, and his chiseled facial features were more pronounced by his lack of facial hair. During one conversation I asked him his age to which he replied he was still a young elf at the age of 83.

THE TRAVEL JOURNAL OF BURGEN BRALUND

“I AM TWO DAYS REMOVED FROM FALGARHOLM”²

I am two days removed from Falgarholm. The mountains have shrunk to foothills, tomorrow I'll descend into the northern plains. I never liked them, I should have brought more brew.

“CROSSED THE PLAINS TODAY...”

Crossed the plains today... I hate the plains. More plains tomorrow and then I must cross the Weatherfall River. I hate rivers. More plains after that, then maybe some hills. This better be worth it, I hate hills. I need a drink.

“HALFLINGS, I HATE HALFLINGS”³

Halflings, I hate Halflings. Their swill tastes like mud and they are far too happy about... everything. I am almost to the Cleft. This better be worth it. If one more Halfling asks me how the weather is up here, I am going to burn down the entire village. I need a drink.

“THEY ARE LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN...”

They are like little children who have eaten too much candy. Apparently, a big ant scared one of their farmers not too long ago. I squashed three on my way here. They're *ants*. Thank the gods I only have to spend a night here... hopefully I will be able to find something to drink.

“THEY ACTUALLY TRIED TO TALK ME INTO SLEEPING...”

They actually tried to talk me into sleeping in one of their little buildings. If I sneezed in my sleep, I would hit my head on their ceilings. I have concluded that common sense is directly proportionate to height. I can only hope the dwarves are the exception to the rule.

2. *These journal entries account for the time before and after Burgen's cobalt expedition detailed on page 20.*

3. *See also "Journal of Geddy Bilstro - Resident of Rindol Field" on page 339 for a halfling's perspective.*

“I AM FINALLY GOING HOME”

I am finally going home. I do not care if it rains so hard I sink into the very earth, I am not stopping in Rindol Field. If I so much as see a halfling, or a dwarf, or a kobold, or anyone else who is too small for their own good, there will be trouble.

“NEVER TRUST SOMEONE WHO CAN’T SEE OVER YOUR KNEES”

Never trust someone who can’t see over your knees. I got my stinking cobalt but I broke my favorite club. I hate zombies. I should have broken those blasted dwarves. And those kobolds... if I ever catch them.

“I’M ALMOST HOME”

I’m almost home. It hasn’t stopped raining since I left the blasted caves. I hate rain. I *have* had ample time to examine my cobalt though. I’m sure it was luck, but those two dwarves actually managed not to ruin it. This trip may have been worth it. Of course, I’m never leaving my mountains again.



JOURNAL OF ELVARA TUHR

PAGE 8

What a joyous day it was yesterday. Thestra saw the formal introduction of the new Prince, Garus. Their Majesties, King Horus Targonor Furth and Queen Annabelle stood upon the Grand Balcony while their Herald proclaimed the name of the royal heir. Milus and I were near the back of the crowd and could not get a good view of the babe.

The celebration continued well into the evening and night. We attended the Guildmaster's Feast. Perhaps I had a bit too much to drink as I accepted Milus' offer for a dance. Somehow, I just can't find a reason to regret that.

PAGE 13

Festival Day

Mother and I were finally able to find the perfect gift for Constance. I was worried. We had visited shop after shop over the past few weeks and had been disappointed each time. This morning, we visited the stalls set up in Market Square before heading to the Temple. In one of them, there was a talkative shopkeeper from Willowroot who, after describing the locket and chain we were looking for, assured me he had the ideal one. He was right. Mother quickly haggled the price. She loves bargaining so.

PAGE 16

I had a conversation with Milus this morning. He is insistent that we should have a stall during market days. His blades certainly show fine craftsmanship and have been fetching a pretty sum when we have them for sale in the shop. His workmanship is much improved since he started in our forge. Milus has even cajoled Mother into not only volunteering to take charge of all the planning for this new venture but also becoming the primary advocate. How he was able to do that, I have no idea but I can't deny it was effective.

PAGE 30

Milus has asked for my hand in marriage. While it wasn't unexpected, it does cause me to reflect on the past. Clearly Milus was always more than an apprentice. For some time, we have been inseparable and I have found myself relying on his counsel. The way my heart quickens when I see him and the calm I find in his presence compelled me more than any sweet words ever could to accept his proposal. We are to be wed this springtime.

PAGE 32

The house is certainly more crowded. Constance, Mother, and I have to make adjustments with our new additions. Milus' son, Rendil, has taken up residence in Constance's room. Constance has moved into Mother's room. These cramped conditions are short lived though with Constance beginning her apprenticeship with Tanner Wylan next month.

As for Rendil, I am not sure what to make of him. Most of his time is absorbed with the following around different members of the Sages Arcane as they go about their daily tasks. Milus tells me some of them have even given Rendil books to study.

PAGE 46

This morning saw the entire Gold Eagle Brigade marching from Targonor. New reports confirmed that the fighting has intensified south of Targonor. The King has ordered all available forces to defend the southern watch. Our forge will certainly be heated well into the night, as we have received an order for additional blades to outfit a new brigade.

PAGE 51

The city is in an uneasy and anxious mood. Constance arrived in tears this morning after Kestrich informed her that three brigades were overrun just two days march south. Every public square and tavern is talking of evacuating and abandoning Targonor. Even this late in the evening, I hear the commotion of tradesman and families loading their wagons and pack animals as they prepare to head out through the Eastern gate.

Earlier tonight, I quenched the fire in the forge as Mother, Milus, and Constance began loading the tools into our wagon. The moment I placed the anvil into the wagon, I felt the finality of the situation. Targonor will be no more. We leave with the artisan caravans for the highlands in the morning. However, I find myself unable to rest knowing the journey will be long and the uncertain future that tomorrow brings.

PAGE 54

We have arrived on the northern coast of the highlands. Our wagon has been overloaded as we assisted Mirdon Vincobble, the tanner of Willowroot, who was the victim of a broken axle. He was forced to abandon many of the hides he had packed but we were able to find places for his tools. We have set up a tent and have begun assembling a new small forge on which to work. Already, we are beset with requests for new tools, repairs of equipment damaged, as well as for weapons.

PAGE 55

Mirdon Vincobble told me a story today about his wife's family, the Rindols. About ten years ago, Jessip and Mara Rindol were living in Willowroot. They had recently lost a young child who drowned in the Beranid. Mara couldn't stand the sight of the river anymore so Jessip packed everything they had and headed east. They found a nice valley past Bordinar's Cleft and build a home.

Their oldest son traveled back to Willowroot to find a bridge and when he came home, he brought with him several other Rindols. Since then, there have been a few new homesteaders each year in Rindol Field. Mirdon said that many of the Halflings, himself included, are going to head there.

PAGE 58

Mirdon Vinecobble stopped by to say his thanks and his farewell. He is continuing onto the lands of the Rindol's. His wife is a distant cousin of Mara Rindol and they have been granted a small parcel of land to homestead.

PAGE 64

Terrible news reached us today. During the defense of Targonor, our beloved king was mortally wounded. The coronation of Prince Garus was performed hastily before he left Targonor. We all worry for our new king, Especially in the face of this menace.

PAGE 70

The Royal contingent of architects and builders has finally arrived. By decree of His Majesty, all artisans and merchants have been ordered to assemble tomorrow morning. The general rumor is that the King is to arrive soon.

PAGE 74

The outpost on this bluff is to be expanded and improved upon. The new name of our refuge is New Targonor; named after our first new order, while under the guidance of the Royal Architect is to forge tools for building. I have no idea where we are to find the resources to complete such a large order.

An interesting rumor is floating about of late. The Standard of Targonor, which was last seen hanging in its place of honor in the Great Castle of Targonor, is missing. It has not been seen in any of the wagon loads arriving from the west. Did someone steal it? I hope it did not fall into the hands of the invaders. Whatever its fate, its absence is just one more reminder of what we have lost in our flight from our home.

PAGE 77

Among every storm, a moment of respite arrives. That is what we experienced today. Constance was married. Mother was beside herself with joy. Naglund is a good man has agreed to assist in the smithy as soon as his enlistment is up. The wedding was not the same festive affair that it would have been in Targonor but the meaning of the ceremony was not lost on anyone. Perhaps life can go on even after the upheaval we have experienced.

PAGE 86

Wagon loads of iron have arrived, fresh from some stockpile of the Kingdom. The masons have begun building a stone wall around the entire bluff. This wall is much thicker than the wall of our forsaken Targonor. Perhaps it will be enough to hold back the legions should they come here. The outpost has also been a hub of activity. Each day, its central keep grows higher and larger, or at least appears to with all the commotion about it.

PAGE 87-88

This afternoon I went to meet Frentyl, one of the foremen at the quarry. He wanted to show me a strange wear pattern on some of their cutting tools. While I was there, I saw a most unexpected sight. Several members of the Sages Arcane were assisting in the quarry. I watched them as they waved their arms and spoke certain incantations that pulled the stone blocks, in large and even cuttings, from the side of the cliff. I asked Frentyl about this and he said if he was able to have ten times the number of them helping, the wall could be completed half the time. However, the lack of those skilled enough to perform these spells, as well as the terrible toll they exact upon the caster, forces him to rely on more mundane sources of labor.

PAGE 90

Our forge burns hot throughout the day and night. I have had to bring in additional smiths and apprentices to keep up with the demands. Milus and I certainly can't keep up at the pace we have been going. One of our newest smiths is from Bordinar's Cleft. His frenzied toil at the anvil rivals what Milus and I can do together in a day.

PAGE 93

Rendil joined us for supper tonight and also gave us some good news. Rendil has progressed through his apprenticeship period within the Sages Arcane. He is to be fully recognized as a Fellow during a ceremony next week. Milus was beaming with pride. I have never seen a prouder father. I could see the look of pain though on his face when Rendil mentioned this to his mother. The loss of a wife and a mother has weighed heavily on both of them for so long. I just hope that my love helps to fill that void, not for Milus but for Rendil as well.

PAGE 94

Rendil leaves for Tursh tomorrow. After that, we are not sure where he goes. We also are not sure when we shall see him again. After the ceremony within the Great Library, Rendil was given a set of new robes and an assignment. From what I can gather each new Fellow of the Sages Arcane is sent out to find their true magical strengths. For most, this mission lasts several years as they travel throughout the land. Along the way, they learn from those they meet and sometimes the perils of the road claim their lives.

PAGE 101

Work has now begun on an inner wall. Thankfully, the demand for tools have subsided somewhat. Our stockpiles of usable iron are dwindling and new veins of ore have proven scarce. There has still been no sighting of the invaders. Our soldiers continue to watch the west vigilantly however, there have been no further incursions past the Beranid river.

PAGE 117

The most tragic news reached us this afternoon. Rendil's traveling partner wrote to tell us that he has been slain while performing his duties for the Sages Arcane. Milus collapsed in the forge on hearing the news. Naglund and I had to carry him into the house. I have never seen him in such a state. I am worried as he won't eat or talk to anyone. Mother has come and is sitting next to him. The two of them have been sitting in the dark for several hours, neither speaking.

PAGE 118

I am much relieved today. Milus is on the way to his normal self. It looks to be a long road still be he is starting to come to terms with his grief. Last night, he came and woke me and we laid crying together sharing each other's sorrow. This morning, he sat at the table with me and the boys. He said very little but at least he is eating. I hope I might even see him back in the forge within the next couple of days. And hopefully, he will begin to speak of his thoughts and feelings in regards to our loss.

PAGE 120

Milus has asked me to write his response to the Sages Arcane. We received a letter from them yesterday. It was hand delivered by a young member of their order. The sight of those robes, the ones Rendil wore so many years on his visits to us, was almost too much for Milus. The letters from the Master, someone named Dorrin Longreat, was polite but seemed to lack any true empathy. Milus accepted the letter with a nod and a polite thanks as I sent the courier on his way.

It wasn't until later this evening that Milus finally read the letter. After dinner, Milus came to me and asked for my help in drafting a letter. He will dictate what he wishes to say and I will put it on paper. We are to start this tomorrow evening.

PAGE 140-141

I worry about Mother. She spends most of her time away from the forge wandering the bluff and watching the sea. While I don't have the need for her assistance in the forge, her mood has turned more sullen. We have all been uprooted, our houses lost, our entire lives turned uncertain. I too worry about what is to become of us. All of us perched upon a rocky bluff overlooking the sea as a gull does upon its nest. Can we truly survive? I try to avoid looking at the sea. I know of nothing beyond the sea that can help us.

PAGE 204

Today marks the tenth anniversary of our flight to New Targonor. When we arrived, there was no name for the small outpost perched atop the bluff. Now, we have home nestled above our new smithy; a home on a street with many other homes and families just like ours. The market square has become a gathering place, just as it was in Targonor. And recently, an ambitious project was started, a library and guildhall for the Sages Arcane. There as been no sign of the legions that destroyed the walls of Targonor and forced us to flee. The patrols are still sent out to search for any sign of further invasion. Thus far, we appear to be safe in our new home.

PAGE 215

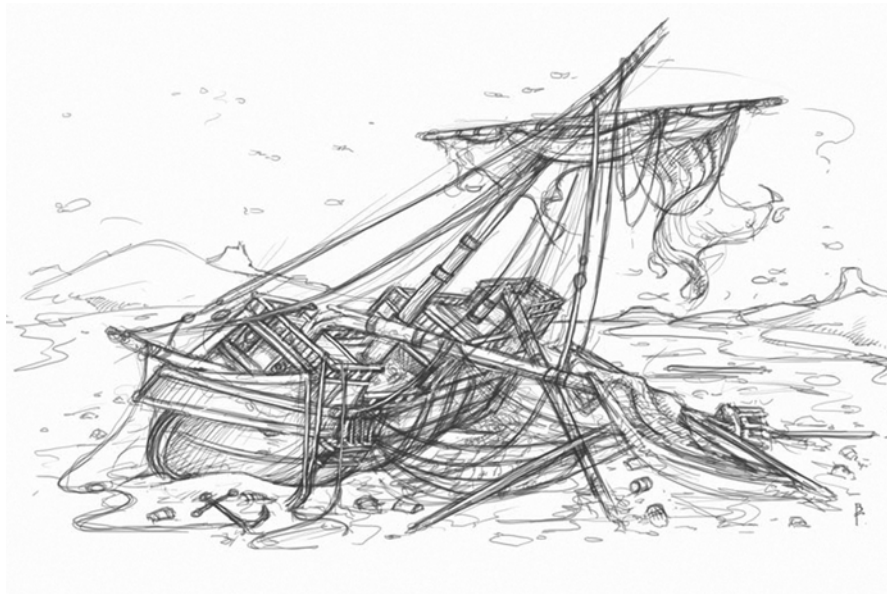
I have seen much in this life. As I reflect upon the events I have witnessed I no longer weep. I instead celebrate the perseverance of my family and neighbors. The challenges we faced made us stronger and prepared us to raise our children to know the dangers we face. I have told my children of the trials we saw. When the day comes that I am but dust and have returned to that from which I came, I will rest peacefully as I am confident that even as Coralís takes his rightful position as Headmaster of the forge and little Mald-rin has chosen his own occupation, they will do so by remembering these lessons. We need to be ever vigilant lest we lose that which we love most.



JOURNALS OF UNKNOWN AUTHORS

“MORE PEOPLE ARRIVE EACH DAY FROM TARGONOR”

More people arrive each day from Targonor. Some are by wagon but many more are coming by foot and carrying only a few belongings within their pack. We have found a bluff overlooking the sea. Many of us have begun to build small structures to provide shelter from the wind. An outpost already exists on this bluff, which the army has used as base for many years. I recently discovered there are a collection of tunnels under the outpost. I hear from some of the more adventurous children that the tunnels extend down to the sea below.

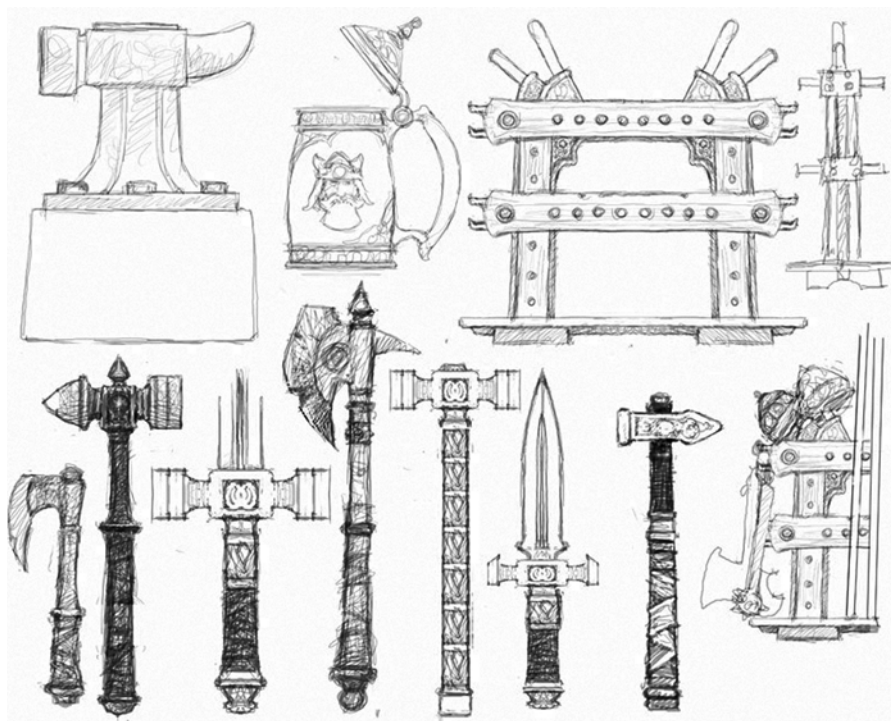


THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS A LYRICAL RECORD OF THE VOICES OF TELON. FROM THE PENS OF POETS AND THE STRINGS OF BARDS—RHYME AND METER TELL TALES OF GODS, ANCIENT TIMES, AND WAR.

“MAKE A DWARVEN FRIEND”

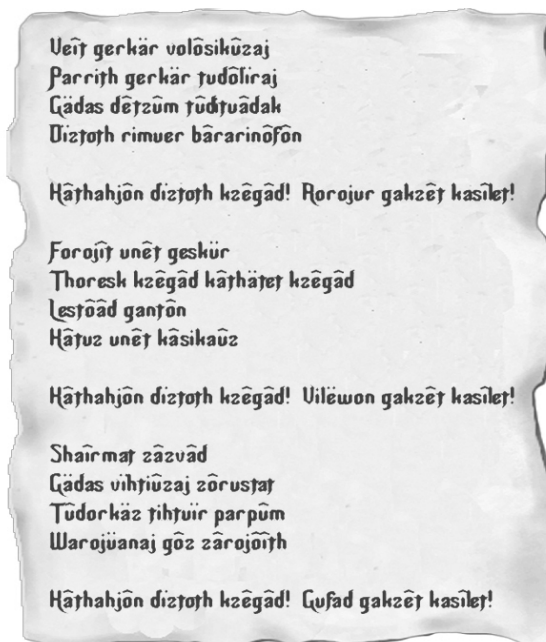
Make a dwarven friend,
have a friend for life.
Make a dwarven enemy,
live a short life.

-Thestran Proverb



"MIND YOUR BEARDS"

SOURCE



TRANSLATION

Mind your beards
 And watch your toes
 'Til light is gone
 And task is o'er

Hammer and stone!
 A tankard of ale!

Bridge the gap
 Lay stone on stone
 A mighty wall
 To tame the flow

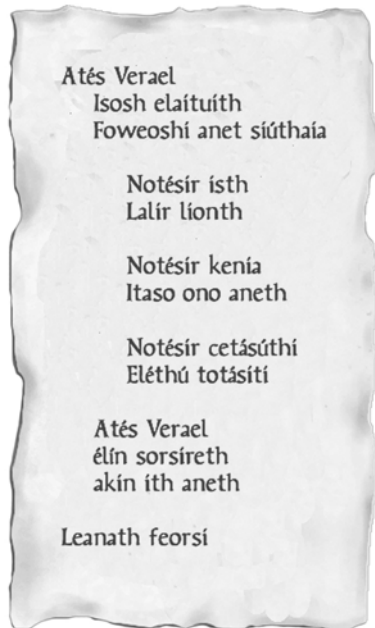
Hammer and stone!
 A barrel of ale!

Time is short
 'Til waters rise
 Together in toil
 Brothers are we

Hammer and stone!
 A river of ale!

"OH VERAEL"

SOURCE



TRANSLATION

Oh Vrael
From the depths
Hear our voice

Our thoughts
Renew your flame

Our memories
Keep you eternal

Our deeds
Reflect your glory

Oh Vrael
In our hearts
We carry you

Be at peace

“RISE FLAMES”

Rise flames,
Consume the flesh.
Honor this warrior
of Dalgrundur's own.
The Master of the Fallen,
Claim his body.
This funeral pyre,
An Altar makes.
The Black Champion
Calls us all to battle
That holy ritual,
Made more so in death.
As the flames die,
The spirit released,
To protect and guide
His kin true.

-Hrolf Eingar the Skald

SONG OF KAERELLUN

Oh Lady of Secrets,
She of many faces
Alliances obscured
Motives shrouded
Beware the plots!

She offers me my desires
Setting them out before me
Within my grasp
Her assistance ensured
I enact my plan

Plans within plans
Schemes within schemes
Reasons ever changing
Kaerellun the Cloaked

The end is the beginning
Of new traps
And fresh webs
Entangled are we
Beware the twists!

My plan uncovered
My enemies aware
Fortune turns to ruin
Surprise becomes defeat
Hope is lost

Plans within plans
Guile within guile
Reasons ever changing
Kaerellun the Conniving

Her words entrance -
Your will transforms to Hers
Reward may fulfill
But what is the price?
Beware the lure!

She returns to rescue
My salvation at hand
The prize is mine
But my will is not
I become Hers

Plans within plans
Snares within snares
Reasons ever changing
Kaerellun the Seductress

Conflict, the element,
Strife, the oft-used tool,
The ruse injected
Chaos begets shift.
Beware the feint!

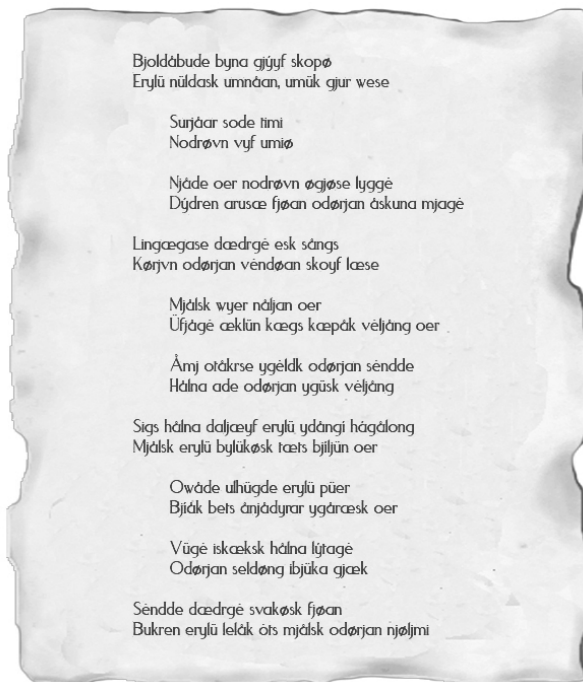
Allies are now enemies
The struggle continues
The hammer of strife
The anvil of conflict
Change is born anew

Plans within plans
Ploy within ploy
Reasons ever changing
Kaerellun the Mother of Strife

Artois Songbinder

“THOSE OF US WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE”

SOURCE



TRANSLATION

Those of us who have gone before
The blood we shed, we commit to you

In battle frenzied
Your presence we feel

Within us your spirit burns
From this land our footprints
shall never fade

Strength of the ancient great ones
Through our mortal bones course

From infirmity shield us
Only a death of glory, bring us

With courage fill our enemies
That honor, our conquests bring

Flame that slays the piercing frost
From the eternal slumber, keep us

Snow, betray the beast
To its lair, lead us

Icy wind that bites,
Our thirsty spears, guide

Enemy of this frozen land
On the morrow, reflect from our eyes



STRANGE POWERS AND ARCANES MAGICKS

THE STUDY OF MAGIC IS INTEGRAL TO THE PEOPLE OF TELON. ONE HAS TO GO NO FURTHER THAN THE FOUNDING AND BUILDING OF NEW TARGONOR TO APPRECIATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRACTICE. AS MUCH AS IT IS A POWERFUL TOOL, IT IS ALSO A DEADLY WEAPON. IT'S DARKER SIDE CAN BE A BANE TO ENEMY NATIONS—AND A CANCER WITHIN.

THE BOOK OF LATARON

CHAPTER I

Mastery of the four elements is the most important aspect of sorcery. However, this is merely the first step to true understanding. A skilled sorcerer goes beyond just conjuring the elements alone, and instead weaves them together like a tapestry, creating strange and wonderful results.

CHAPTER IV

The four elements are fire, air, water, and earth, and the creatures that embody these elements have great power. To harness the elements means strength, but to control the very avatars that represent them? Even the greatest masters of the arcane have failed to properly do this. The result has only been death.

CHAPTER VI

Proper use of the four elements, and the techniques to weave them together, are the sign of a true sorcerer. There are unfounded legends, however, of ancient elemental magics that can take even a master spell weaver to a higher level of power. Such claims are likely false. Even if such magics existed they have been lost in the passage of time.

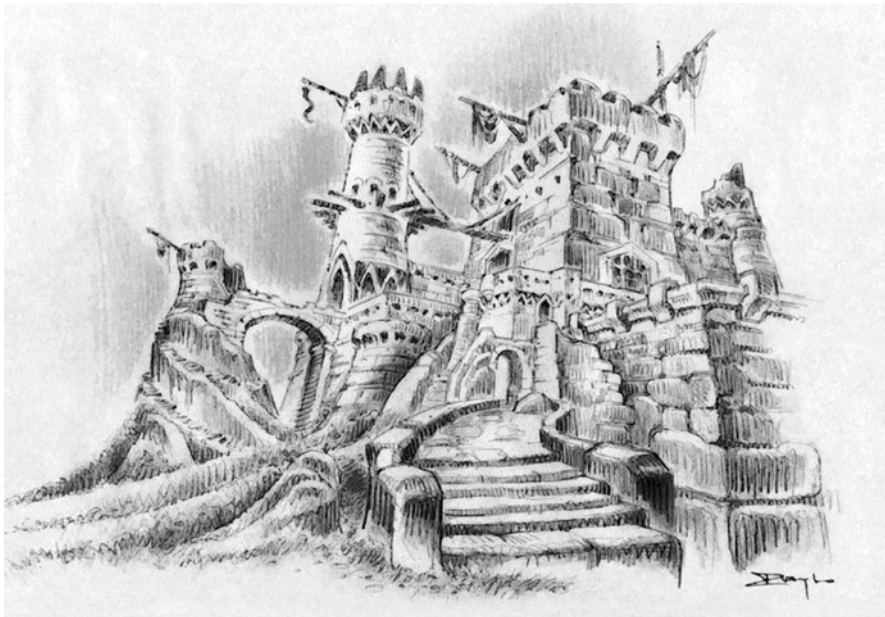
RECEIPTS, CONTRACTS, AND LISTS

MERCANTILISM IS WHAT BUILDS, DESTROYS, AND SUBSIDIZES LIFE IN TELON. THE PRICE OF “DOING BUSINESS” IS PAPER-WORK AND THE MUNDANE TRAILS LEFT BEHIND OFFER A UNIQUE VIEW INTO THE WORKING CLASS OF TELON.

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS, AS ITS TITLE SUGGESTS, A COLLECTION OF THE ACCOUNTING CHECKS AND BALANCES FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

DECLARATION OF APPRENTICESHIP

Be it known to present and future Guild Masters of New Targonor that Viona Marsei, of the village of Tursh, apprentices Guillame, her son, to Matteus Jorgen on security of her house, her person, and all her belongings, and the share that Guillame ought to have in them, so that Matteus Jorgen will teach him the craft of tailoring during the span of five years. Guillame will be provided shelter as well as food in the duration of his apprenticeship. And if there should be reason within two years for Guillame to default within this agreement Matteus Jorgen will return him, and Viona Marsei, his mother guarantees this on the security of her person and goods. Viona Marsei further pledges that any loss or damage Matteus Jorgen suffers through actions of Guillame, her son, she will reimburse the loss and damage through the security of herself and her goods.



SHIPWRIGHT LETTER

To the August Minister Dardan,

Greetings to you, sir. I send this missive regarding the commission of your most recent order. Our company has recently encountered supply setbacks that make it impossible to meet our agreed completion date. In addition to requesting more time, we are writing to ask for a fee adjustment. While I do not wish to bore you with a list of technical shipwright details, I do want to explain these issues as clearly as possible in hopes that the Crown's understanding of them will hasten renegotiation of our agreement and resolution of the problems.

As you know, steamed timbers are needed in great supply when building ships. Unfortunately, the most recent delivery of wood to us was of such inferior quality that we refused it. We are currently short the three wagon loads of timber needed to complete the outer hulls of five ships. We are thankful that we have found a trusted vendor who can replace the unsatisfactory goods. Our hope is that we will receive the needed shipment in the next week. However, the new supplier's price is significantly higher. Thus we request an adjustment to our original agreement with the Crown. We are committed to both creating superior ships and to providing for those in our employ. If we were to absorb this increased cost, we would be forced to either cut corners in fulfilling the order or we would be required to ask several long standing and competent employees to leave. Neither solution is acceptable to us. We humbly ask the Crown to hear our petition and increase our compensation to cover the new costs.

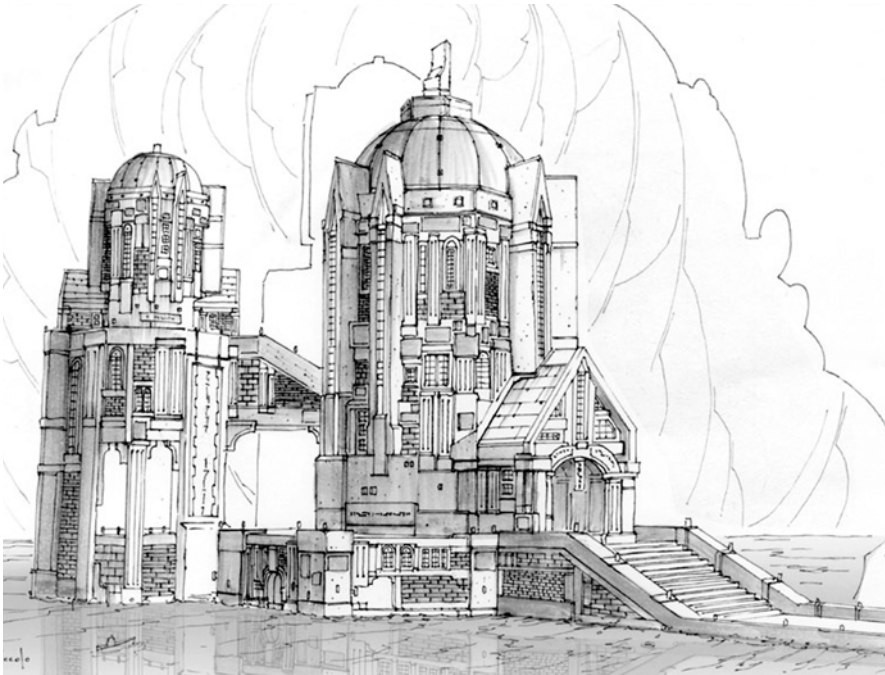
Finally, the canvas sail supplier recommended by the Crown is extremely late in fulfilling our order. Our last visit to their warehouse revealed a startling near-disaster. We were dismayed to find that the canvas for the mainsail had been cut too short to accommodate the length of the boom. The sail makers have since corrected the problem, but the completed order is slow in arriving.

SHIPWRIGHT LETTER

We of Lokus and Marcotte Shipyards know how important the delivery of this fleet is to the Crown. With His Majesty's latest edict, many other interests have begun to build and outfit ships. We recognize the need for sturdy and impressive ships to carry His Majesty's soldiers. Our desire is to fulfill the confidence the Crown has placed in us.

In The Crown's service,

Shandler Lokus
Master Shipwright
Lokus & Marcotte Shipyards
New Targonor



WYNDSON'S EMPORIUM MARKET DAY TALLY

TALLY MARKET DAY WYNDSON'S EMPORIUM

ACQUISITIONS:

- 3 Bushels Turnips - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 2 Crates Potatoes - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 2 Bushels Carrots - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 1 Bushel Wool - Mabel Swingarn of Tursh
- 3 Barrels Mushrooms - Bru Delvedeep of Bordinar's Cleft
- 14 Kegs Ale - Bru Delvedeep of Bordinar's Cleft
- 4 Packets Dried Rose Seed - Sheornie Thendoe of Leth Nurae
- 16 Game Hens - Tahum Morgan of Tursh

SALES:

- 1 Handful of Beaded Baubles - young Halfling traveling in the employ of Halp Grimbo
- 3 Tins Salted Pork - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 1 Pair Sturdy Work Boots - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 2 Dresses (special order) - Halp Grimbo of Rindol Fields
- 1 Shovel - Dorna Agen of Tursh
- 1 Rake - Dorna Agen of Tursh
- 1 Wheelbarrow Wheel - Philip Agen of Tursh
- 3 Sheaves Parchment - Ylese Marchand, Agent of the Sages Arcane, New Targonor
- 2 Gallons Ink Black - Ylese Marchand, Agent of the Sages Arcane, New Targonor
- 150 Stones Coal - Bru Delvedeep of Bordinar's Cleft
- 16 Game hens - Hollis Caine, Agent of the Eagle and Crest Tavern, New Targonor
- 1 Crate Potatoes - Hollis Caine, Agent of the Eagle and Crest Tavern, New Targonor
- ½ Bushel Carrots - Hollis Caine, Agent of the Eagle and Crest Tavern, New Targonor
- 3 Kegs Ale - Hollis Caine, Agent of the Eagle and Crest Tavern, New Targonor

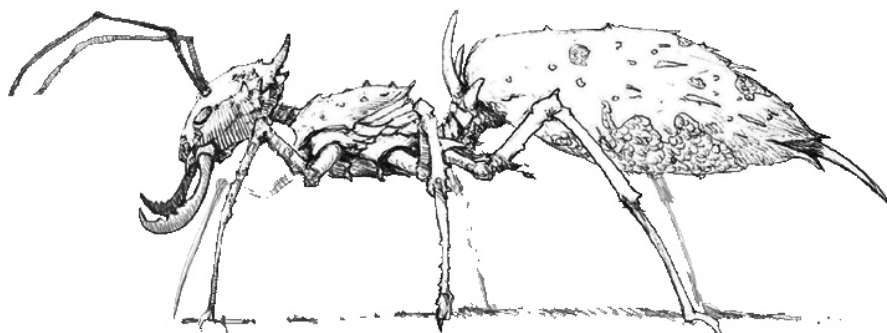
Business was slower today. Rain kept many away. However, there were some odd requests which we must try to fulfill, Iasern bless. Travelling party from Leth Nurae, which was not associated with Sheornie Thendoe, inquired about obtaining Greenleaf. Evidence of its shortage is becoming more commonplace with the loss of the fields in Beranid Downs.

Marcus Wyndson



CHAPTER 11 — TOME OF BEASTS

THE GREAT “TOME OF BEASTS” WITHIN THE GREAT LIBRARY OF NEW TARGONOR IS A CAREFUL CATALOGING OF KNOWN TELON FAUNA—FROM THE LIVING TO THE DEAD.

ANT {GIANT}

The giant ant is in all aspects save for its size, akin to a normal ant. It has a segmented body, three sets of legs and pincers on its head. Giant ants are capable of carrying many times their own body weight. Very rarely are giant ants found alone, generally they travel to and from their nest in large numbers. They will (and do) eat nearly anything, but seem to prefer scavenging dead animals. In combat, giant ants will throw themselves at their opponent, with no regard for defense. Their primary means of attack is biting with their large pincers.

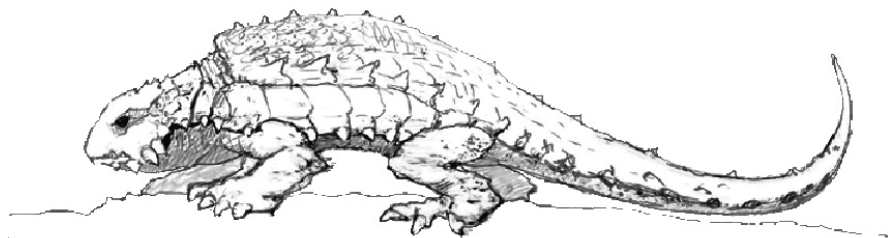
Habitat. Plains

Body Type. Insect

Intelligence. Animal

Undead. N

BASILISK



Protected by a thick coat of armor-like scales, the basilisk holds itself close to the ground, patiently watching its surroundings. Its four legs are built for strength, rather than speed -- although it is quite capable of short distance sprints. The basilisk's primary means of attack are its strong bite and tail, which it uses in a whip like manner against its opponents. It has also been said, that staring directly into the creatures eyes freeze's one's muscles, rendering one unable to move.

Habitat. Hills

Body Type. Quadruped

Intelligence. Animal

Undead. N

COCKATRICE



The cockatrice is frequently referred to by peasants as a chicken-hawk, due to its resemblance to both species -- though it is not actually directly related to either. It stands just over waist-high on the average human and has a very unpleasant demeanor. The cockatrice is a hunter who feeds primarily on small mammals such as mice or rabbits. It has wings, but cannot fly and thus must rely on its speed while catching prey. It has a strong tail, but its primary means of attack are its razor-like beak and claws. Cockatrices are mean spirited creatures, and have been known to attack animals much larger than themselves seemingly at random.

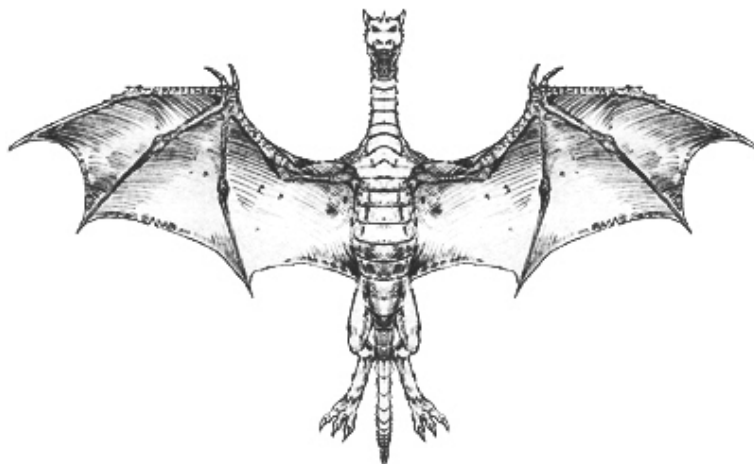
Habitat. Plains

Body Type. Avian

Intelligence. Animal

Undead. N

DRAKE



Drakes come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but all look like large lizards with wings – rather than a front set of legs. They have long scale-covered bodies, with the underbelly generally a slightly lighter shade of color than the rest. They are hunters and will eat a large variety of live prey. While on the ground drakes walk primarily with their hind legs, but often use their wings for balance. They have a very strong bite, capable of snapping bone but they often attack with their sharp clawed feet as well.

Habitat. Mountains

Body Type. Serpentine

Intelligence. Low

Undead. N

SALAMANDER



Salamanders are large serpentine creatures. Their lower halves are built similar to that of a snake, but their torsos are much more humanoid. The muscles in their tail help them to slither along the ground (or through the water) while their arms enable them a much greater range of actions than snakes. Salamanders are predators, and dwell primarily in swampy regions. They have sharp claws on each hand, but their jaws are much stronger than their arms – making a vicious bite the salamander's preferred method of attack.

Habitat. Swamps

Body Type. Serpentine

Intelligence. Medium

Undead. N

TROGLODYTE



Troglodytes are large humanoid reptiles who make their homes almost exclusively in swampy areas. They are lean, but quite hardy and superb swimmers. Troglodytes will eat both live prey and plants but prefer to hunt. Their favorite prey is fish but they will consume a wide variety of small animals. Both their hands and feet are webbed for swimming, but clawed as well -- although their most dangerous form of attack is their powerful bite.

Habitat. Swamps

Body Type. Serpentine

Intelligence. Medium

Undead. N

TROLL



While not known for their intelligence, trolls are exceptionally large, strong, and quick. Their beady black eyes reflect their violent nature and foul dispositions. They are widely feared and have been known to single-handedly attack caravans that wander into their territories. Trolls thrive in most conditions, and inhabit a wide range of environments. They move by knuckle walking and can travel for extended periods, covering great distances without rest. When attacking, trolls stand upright, swing their massive fists, and bite with their sharp teeth. They are also covered in thick hide and bony plates that protect them from injury in combat. Trolls are well-adapted predators.

Habitat. Hills

Body Type. Biped

Intelligence. Low

Undead. N

WILD BOAR



Few creatures are known to be as volatile and bad tempered as wild boars. Wild boars are physically very similar to domesticated hogs. Male boars have thick tusks protruding from their mouths. They are extremely territorial and when backed into a corner are fierce fighters. They typically live in a burrow, and if mated have about half a dozen offspring following closely behind them at all times. Boars are not hunters; they instead forage for large insects and plants. Their tusks are their only means of defense. Creatures often avoid confrontations with them due to the boar's belligerent temperament.

Habitat. Plains

Body Type. Quadruped

Intelligence. Animal

Undead. N

WORM {GIANT}



These oversized worms are most commonly seen half submerged in water or mud in swampy regions, though they can be found nearly anywhere. They move very little, and when they do it is almost always to feed. Giant worms will eat anything that comes into their path, and regurgitate anything they are unable to digest. They are reluctant to fight, but when there are no other options, they have a powerful jaw capable of causing serious damage.

Habitat. Subterranean

Body Type. Worm

Intelligence. Animal

Undead. N

CHAPTER 12 — QUOTES

WHILE THE PURPOSE OF THIS LORE COMPILATION IS TO ROOT OUT THE WRITTEN WORD, ON OCCASION SOMEONE'S SIMPLE QUIPS ARE RECORDED FOR POSTERITY'S SAKE. TO THIS END, THIS SECTION EXPLORES THE VARIOUS QUOTES OF THE PEOPLE OF TELON.

BARRET BARLEYGROVE, CHAMPION OF WILLOWROOT

This bridge unites the two shores of river Beranid as well as the hearts of Willowroot and Targonor. Our homes and hearths welcome all of you. Your soldiers protect us and our farms feed your children. On this day, I can announce that the Halflings of Willowroot pledge to stand with their human cousins whatever may come.

-On the dedication of Willowroot Bridge

CITIZENS OF AHGRAM

KADILA DOSSOKALE

Scholars will tell you the Ahkrem Cavern were a place for mystics and shamans to visit. At one time, supposedly, that place was filled with powerful spirits. And maybe it was, but that doesn't matter nowadays. Jharuu inhabit the caverns now. Someone should really clear that place out.

METOKLO KANDISH, MERCHANT

The Gnomes are rather reclusive. They do not seem to appreciate any outsiders, though the younger Gnomes seem a little more open-minded. They do a very brisk trade with Ahgram that is beneficial to both parties and, when all is said and done, seem to be capable allies.

CITIZENS OF KHAL

MATO ISNYLE

The Khelium Mountains are quite a sight to see, my friend. Yes, I went up there to look around and explore when I was younger. There are a lot of interesting Gnomish ruins on those cliffs. Unfortunately, there are also some nasty animals roaming around that wouldn't think twice of making a meal out of you.

CITIZENS OF LETH NURAE

KELLETH GLADELEAF, BLACKSMITH

I have heard enough comments about Dwarven metalwork. I will have you know that the artisans of Leth Nurae have more than just dabbled in the process. Our armors are sturdy yet easy to maneuver in, and our weapons are much, much more refined than those cattle-butcherer tools the dwarves make.

NADORAL GLEND, TRADER OF FINE GOODS

Going into the wilderness is rather dangerous. I have known traders who thought such a shortcut would be more profitable and they ended up dead. The guards keep the roads around Leth Nurae clear of most threats, but they hold little sway once you remove yourself from the beaten path.

NAILYA KATOZEN, GUARD

The Vulmane have tried to encroach upon our land too often. While we understand the threat from the west that haunts us all, we cannot tolerate their presence in our forests. Their kind is better off in the eastern mountains with the other savages.

LILLO TRAVISH, GARDENER

Humans and the Halflings seem to get along well together. I went up north awhile ago, and it was quite a sight to see. Personally, I think we could learn a little from this kind of relationship. Of course, not many in Leth Nurae agree with me.

CALYEE WELMAN, FORESTER

Even though I have traveled far, I have seen nothing wondrous than the forests around my homeland of Leth Nurae. Beautiful trees, abundant wildlife it is a very tranquil place. However, I am concerned about the outsiders I have seen camped in the deeper forest. They are a disrupting influence, and it is said that they have been poaching as well.

RAVALE WETHERFAWN, HUNTER

The Dwarves? Well, we get a few of them in town from time to time. Their constructed wares aren't really popular, but there is a market for the ore they mine. We have plenty of wood from the forest, but good metal and minerals are only available from more mountainous areas.



CITIZENS OF MEKALIA

DARK ELF CHILD, MOUNT STIIRHAD REFUGEE

My family fled Mount Stiirhad as the Elementals filled the halls with lava my father guarded our retreat. As we crossed the last threshold, I saw a towering beast of fire and lighting strike him down. It took many days of walking across the sand of Liath for us to reach this stinking outpost of humans. My mother waited until we reached safety before she took her own life in shame.

DARK ELF NOBLE, MOUNT STIIRHAD REFUGEE

Mount Stiirhad ah, yes. Rivers of lava flowed in canyons beneath cities we carved from the living mountain. We watched our enemy's assaults upon us and laughed as they died and joined the ash in the air. We will beat back the Elementals, and return to our rightful home.

DARK ELF SOLDIER, MOUNT STIIRHAD REFUGEE

Elementals, how I loathe them. Disgusting fusions of magic, elements and borrowed flesh.

NAI JOUNISS, MERCENARY

Trust the Dark Elves? You must be joking, my friend. Indeed, we work with them at this point in time, but I assure you this is only until they've outlived their usefulness. I'm sure this more pressing problem will be taken care of shortly, and then the Dark Elves will be next. They cannot be forgiven for their actions.

DRAPP KAVINDASH

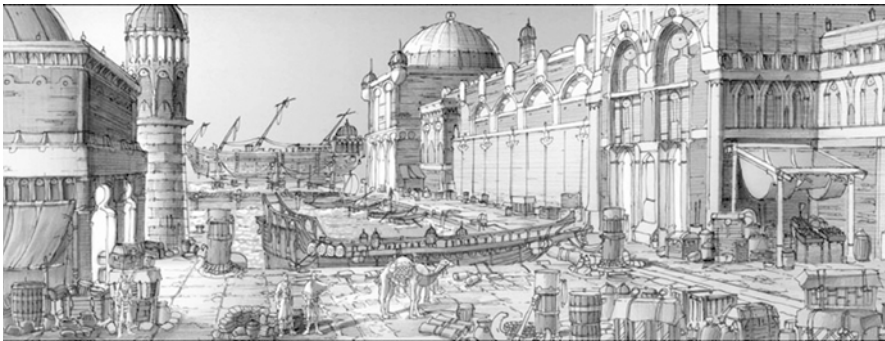
The Liath Desert? No, no, no you don't want to go there. Always sandstorms raging on, massive lizards prowling around, and poisonous scorpions ready to sting! Very unfriendly place. I also heard that there are strange elemental creatures that patrol that wasteland.

TOGIN RAVELANE, GROCER

Honestly? The Kurashasa frighten me! I find them to be most unpredictable. At least I can tell what a Dark Elf is thinking, even if I'd rather not now.

KROVER TAKALIS, RETIRED STONEMASON

Outsiders are not welcome in Mekalia. Especially not the Dark Elves. I am strongly against allying ourselves with them, but of course the decision is not in my hands. They are violent and devious. I say we slam our gates shut and let the others fend for themselves.



CITIZENS OF NEW TARGONOR

CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO UNKNOWN CITIZENS

OVERHEARD IN THE MARKET SQUARE, NEW TARGONOR

"I can't understand why we must go through this every week. It isn't like we forget it."

"Oh, I know. Every time we have to wait here while the old fool dodders out and says his prayer. This really has to stop."

"Ha! 'May Your words form our contracts.' You think that Iasern was involved in that last agreement with Marcus? If so, you better watch your step for it sounds like you haven't been praying enough."

"Shush. I know that was a terrible deal but I got the best of him in the end. I sold him that lot of silk shirts."

"You don't mean the ones that..."

"Oh yes I do. Let's hope he is wearing one of them when the rainy season begins."

"Oh, that is rich. I can't wait to see... What? Like you actually are listening to this prayer? Leave us be. Turn around... I said turn around."

"My word, some people."

"I know. Anyways, I think he is finishing up finally. Ah yes, here it is. Come on, say it. Get to the end."

"Thus shall it be."

"Thus shall it be."

"Alright, now we can finally begin the day."

"I swear that prayer gets longer each time."

"It doesn't. You are only thinking that because you hate to hear it so much."

"No, it does. I certainly don't remember it having a line about blessing the looms which produce the linens."

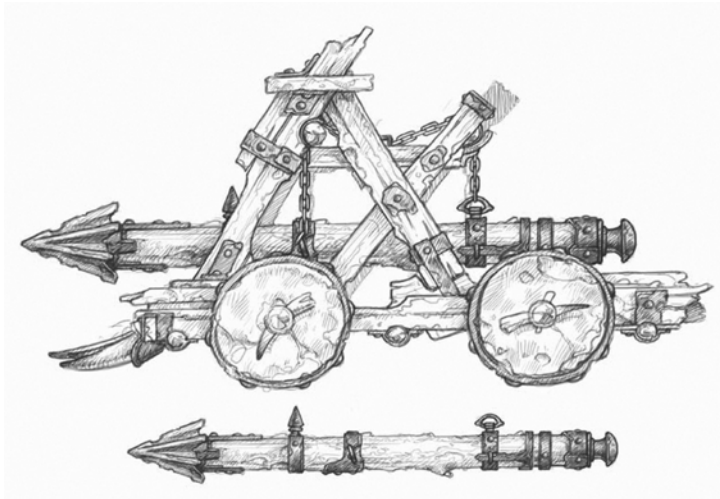
CITIZENS OF UNKNOWN QALIAN ORIGIN

MANDAOB BLAKAORI, HUNTER

The Kura have quite the knack for hunting and tracking. Their experienced hunters end up making me appear to be nothing more than a novice, despite my years of training. Rather disheartening sometimes.

ROSI MANDERKISH, CITY GUARD

I think working with the Humans can only benefit us. They may be a little odd, and they are certainly fond of in-fighting, but they are at least civilized and reasonable. Well, except for the residents of Lomshir. They are a different story altogether.



GELGAR LONSTAT, MASTER OF THE SAGES ARCANE

It should not be overlooked how great a role our members have contributed to this city. Along with the sweat and toil of the refugees, members of the Sages Arcane have also lent their talents to building New Targonor. Where stonemasons used tool and strength, our brethren were alongside them using spells. When fire was needed to clear the way, our brethren controlled it and shaped it. We have given our lives in service of the Crown when the need arose. Our place in this city and within the Kingdom is well established. We have chosen this building as ours but will allow the citizens access to it provided they follow our rules.



The family of any candidate taken into the Sages Arcane for training, regardless of whether they advance to apprenticeship, must be compensated. The rumors circulating of late regarding nonpayment to several families in Tursh is disheartening. I am certain that any misunderstandings that sparked these accusatory rumors will be resolved forthwith.

SAGES ARCANE, UNKNOWN MEMBERS

OVERHEARD COMMENTS FROM THE SAGES ARCANE CONCLAVE, LIBRARY, NEW TARGONOR

This year we have turned more applicants away than last year. Each year this pattern repeats. Every dim-witted dreamer with visions of flinging fire from their fingertips wastes our time. Those with the true talent are few and far between and we have been better served with focusing on those adepts our searches find.



This is not that difficult. If you cannot master this simple incantation, how do you expect to earn your robes? I have seen more practiced pronunciations from the scullery maids. Perhaps you are better suited to spend your life with dirt under your nails, living in a hovel on over-farmed land. Whatever the case, you are certainly not meant for the Sages Arcane.

EDONUS TAGGART, OF THE RED BLADE UNIT

Our scouts report that the dead will be here within the day. We have precious few hours left to prepare. If this is my last entry, to any who read this after I am gone, it was an honor to serve Targonor and I do not regret a thing.

KING JODUS TARGONOR

On this day, I decree this wondrous city shall henceforth be known as Targonor. It is so named to honor my father, King Loric Targonor, the liberator of the people of Thestra and the Guiding Light. His deeds and words shall inspire us never to falter. This city shall be the seat of the Kingdom and serve as a beacon to the land forever more. The Standard of Targonor, carried by my father throughout his battles to unite the Kingdom, shall be enshrined within the Great Hall as a reminder of his faithfulness and vigilance.

KING LORIC TARGONOR

As long as my standard remains, I shall be with you.

- Speaking before his assembled troops



Our society lives within us, not within the confines of stone walls nor under thatch roofs. Walls can be destroyed; roofs can be set afire. The value of society -the worth of us all- is carried by our actions and our hearts, which lead us to act.

-Speaking at the dedication of Willowroot Bridge



Who among us has not suffered loss in these recent days? Who among us has not been touched by evil's foul hands? But I caution you: returning an evil action for an evil deed will endanger us all. Our very existence relies upon our ability to transcend the perpetuation of strife.



Mercy is something granted us in these dark days, it is our duty, nay, our destiny, to show mercy to one another.

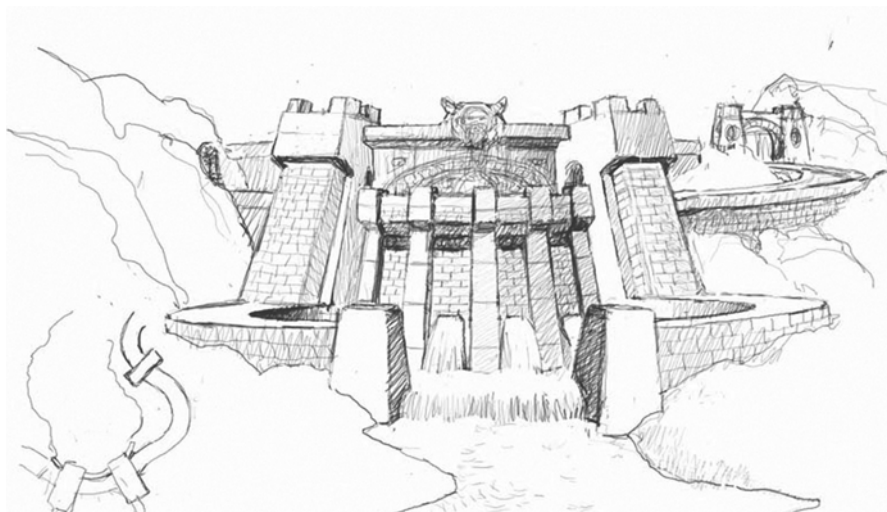


Evil chooses to hide but the light of righteousness shall ever find it.



I know not what caused the upheaval we have all witnessed and experienced but I do know that it has left me changed. Just as the land looks unfamiliar, the face looking back at me from the reflection is unknown to me... I worry about the harvest, the stores we have laid up... the acceptance of more refugees into our already swollen walls. How can we possibly survive? I count on the advice and camaraderie of you, Tresh, as well as the rest of our earnest cadre, to give me my strength. We certainly survive by grace and our faith.

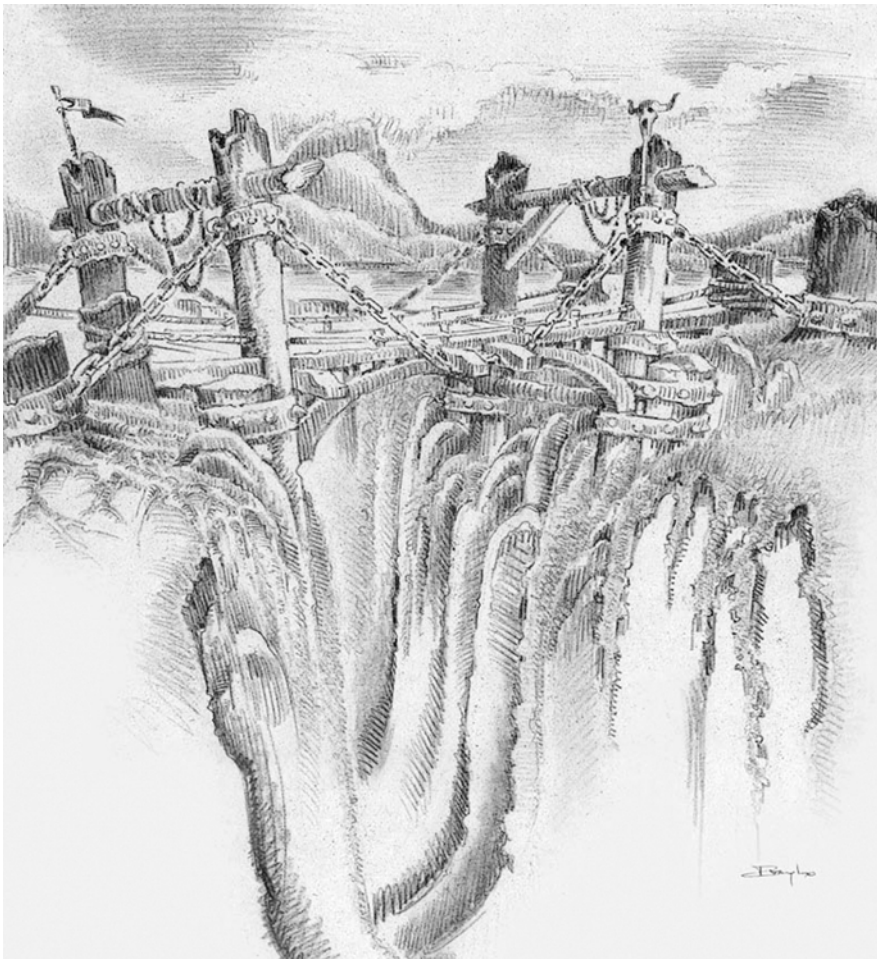
-In a letter to Tresh Umberfill, his trusted lieutenant



NOVIC MERCER TARGONOR

The royal line of Targonor, though sometimes assailed by outside forces, has prevailed. Targonor is Thestra in name, in deed, and in divine right.

-Speaking on the 500th anniversary of the creation of the Kingdom of Thestra



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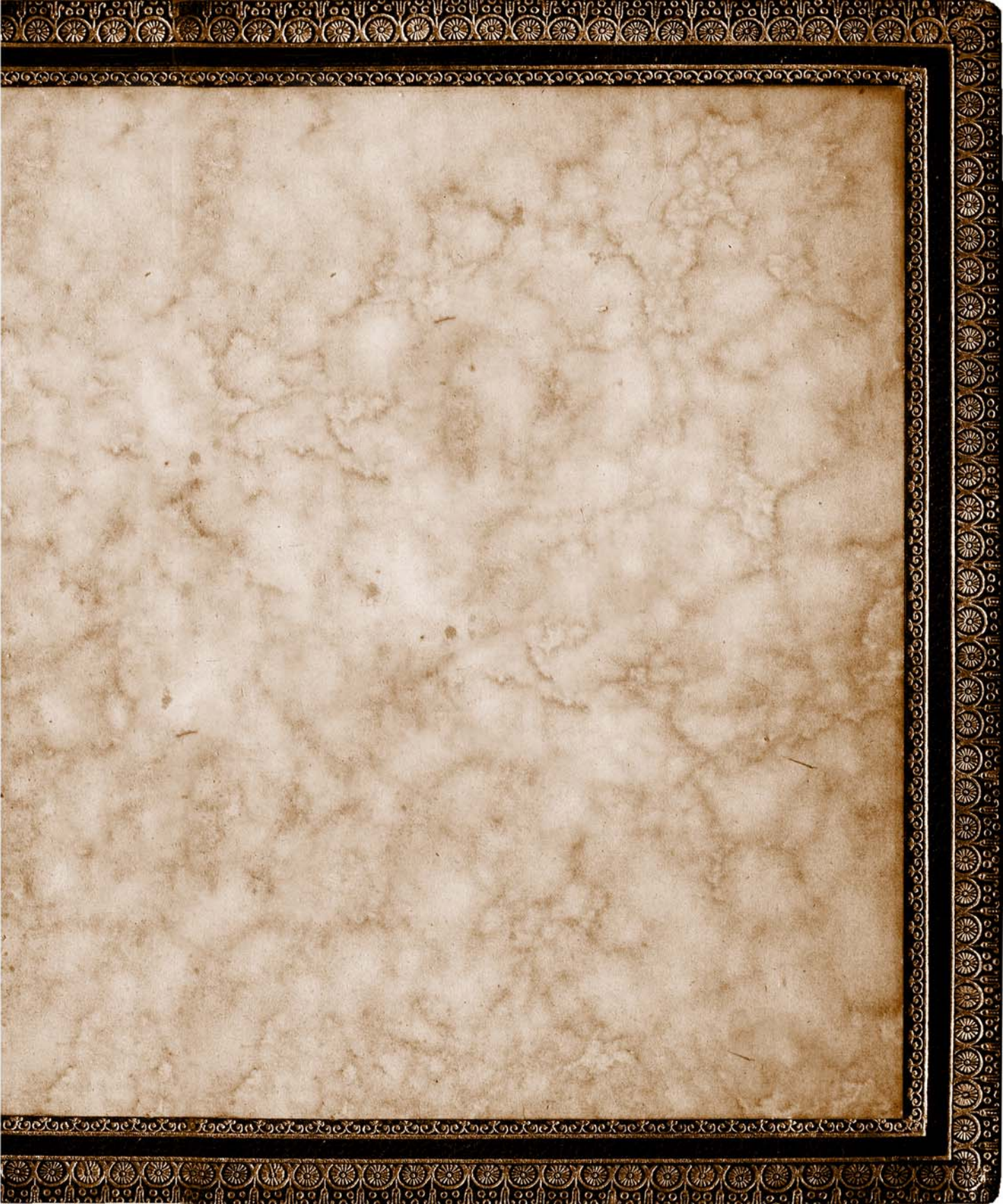
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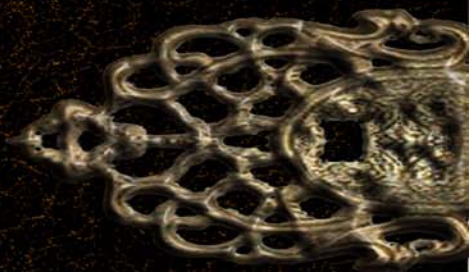
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